SAVED BY THE BELL
The COLLEGE Years
A Superbook
Mistletoe Magic
by Beth Cruise
Romance is in the air at Cal U!

chapter 1

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly, fa la la la la . . ."

Kelly Kapowski was singing merrily away as she decorated California University's Student Health Center with sprigs of holly. She'd just put the finishing touch on her desk—a bright-red ribbon braided through a green wreath—when the head nurse, Ms. Tompkins, hurried over and interrupted her Christmas medley.

"Miss Kapowski," the nurse said sternly, peering down her long, straight nose at Kelly. "I don't remember seeing vocalist—or Santa's little helper—listed as part of your office duties here."

Kelly looked guiltily at the stack of admission records she was supposed to be filing. "I'm sorry, Ms. Tompkins. I was only trying to make the place a little cheerier. Can you imagine being stuck in the clinic right before Christmas vacation?"

Nurse Tompkins humphed. "Yes, I can. I've been working here for over twenty years. And I can

tell you, missy, there are a lot worse places to be. Now, if you'll get back to your filing, I think everyone will be better off. Including the patients."

"Yes, Ms. Tompkins." *Talk about a Scrooge,* Kelly thought, watching the nurse's retreating back. Would anything make this woman crack a smile? But Kelly couldn't waste any more time wondering. Nurse Tompkins would be back to check on her work in a few short minutes.

Kelly reached for the first form on the admissions pile. "No more singing," she told herself. "It's back to the old grindstone for you, Miss Kapowski." Still, Kelly couldn't resist finishing off her song with a final ". . . la, la, la, la."

# # #

An hour later, Kelly's shift was over. She slammed the filing cabinet shut with a satisfying clunk and grinned.

Kelly really did enjoy her part-time job at the college health center. It was a responsible position, and Kelly knew it was important work. Plus, the money was helping to put her through college. Kelly came from a big family that had plenty of love but not a lot of cash. Still, all things considered, Kelly was glad her shift was over. The sterile rooms and the medicinal smell of the clinic weren't quite in keeping with her holiday spirit.

Moving quickly now, Kelly slipped on her jean

jacket, flipped her long brown hair over the collar, and headed for home.

Home, Kelly thought as she walked through campus. A December chill was in the air, and she buttoned her jacket all the way up. *Who'd have thought I'd be calling my college suite "home"?*

At the beginning of her first semester in college, Kelly didn't think she'd ever feel that way. Home? Home was back in southern California, with her mom, dad, sisters, and brothers. It wasn't in northern California, where she was thrown into a dorm room with two girls she hardly knew.

But she did have her Bayside High buddies—Zack Morris, A. C. Slater, and Samuel "Screech" Powers—in the same suite, sharing a common room. And slowly but surely, the entire suite began to feel like home, her suitemates like family.

Kelly sighed, taking a shortcut through the quadrangle. It had been a long, tough haul.

Their first semester had been hard on everyone: Kelly and her two roommates, Alex Tabor and Leslie Burke—*and* the guys. Six different personalities sharing one small suite . . . everyone adjusting to being in college and away from home . . . and maybe the most difficult thing of all—having to sort out their romantic entanglements.

Kelly had thought it'd be easier starting college with Zack, Slater, and Screech—three of her best

friends from high school. But as it turned out, the old relationships sometimes made the new ones more difficult.

First there was the matter of Zack Morris. Kelly and Zack had so much history together: knowing each other since kindergarten, dating through high school. And even when they'd broken up, they vowed they'd always stay friends.

But it hadn't been easy watching Zack make the moves on her very own roommate—blond and pretty Leslie Burke—their first few weeks at school. The relationship didn't work out, and now Zack and Kelly were back together. Kelly was thrilled. She'd never really gotten over Zack and felt certain that he was the guy for her. But it still wasn't easy being in such close quarters. They'd barely learned how to be suitemates, and now they had to learn how to be boyfriend and girlfriend all over again.

And then there was Slater. Right from the very beginning, he and Alex had had their eyes on each other. But it wasn't the calmest relationship around. In fact, it was downright stormy. They were dating, then they weren't dating. They were in love, then they were in hate. And they had both wanted to drag Kelly into each and every argument.

Sometimes Kelly felt as if she were being pulled in half. Tugging on one side was Slater, whom she'd known for years and years. On the other side was

Alex, now a good friend as well—and a girl. Wasn't there some sort of female code when it came to guys? Something about sticking together no matter what?

But Alex could be a lot to handle. She was a drama major, and somehow she turned everything into a big scene. "What was Slater like in high school?" she'd ask. "Who did he date? Why did they break up?" Alex would fire off question after question, and Kelly would answer as best she could, feeling as if she was on a TV cop show, playing a witness grilled by Detective Alex Tabor.

All in all, the suite had seen its share of blowouts. *Thank goodness for Screech,* Kelly thought, smiling as a picture of the curly-haired goofball popped into her mind. He was always good for comic relief—turning his skin orange from some science experiment, babbling about a new computer program, or even just walking into walls. Half the time, Screech wouldn't know why everyone was laughing. But that only made everyone laugh harder. Screech definitely helped ease the tension.

But now it's Christmas, Kelly thought as she neared the dorm. *And there shouldn't be any tension to ease.*

Holidays were important to Kelly. And more than anything, she wanted this one to turn out perfectly.

"We have to put away our differences and get into the holiday spirit," she said out loud, almost laughing at herself for sounding so serious. "Joy to the world. Peace on earth. Good will to men."

"And women," Kelly added as she opened the door to the common room and heard the cackle of loud voices. "Because when you have three men and three women sharing one suite, you really need it."

# # #

Inside the room, Kelly was met with the sweet smell of hot chocolate and gingerbread cookies. Alex Tabor, auburn curls pulled away from her flushed face, was playfully shooing A. C. Slater away from the stove so she could check the Christmas cookies she was baking.

Pulling out the tray, Alex gave a loud, dramatic sigh. "My gingerbread men are burned!" She poked one gingerly, and it broke into little bits.

"Well, Alex," Slater said, his warm brown eyes lighting up at his own wit, "I guess that's the way the cookie crumbles. Now, if you'll get out of my way, I'll just get back to my perfectly made hot chocolate."

Kelly held her breath. Alex and Slater had recently broken up. But you never knew how they were going to react to one another. Under the best of circumstances, an exchange like this could jump-

start a flare-up. And this definitely wasn't the best of circumstances.

Surprisingly, Alex grinned and sprinkled the cookie bits in Slater's curly hair. "*That's* how the cookie crumbles," she said, laughing.

Kelly laughed, too. It seemed like Alex and Slater had decided to be on friendly terms—at least for the holiday. So that was one less worry. Maybe this Christmas *would* be peaceful.

Kelly threw her jacket on the couch. "What's going on, guys?"

"We're trying to decide where to put the Christmas tree," Screech Powers said. "So would you please hang your jacket in the closet where it belongs? We're going to move the couch, and I'm afraid the extra weight will be too much for Zack to handle." Screech tried to make a muscle with his skinny arm. "Although I can probably lift this baby all by myself." He gave the couch a kick to show his strength. "Ow! That hurt!"

Ignoring Screech for the moment, Kelly walked over to Zack and gave him a kiss hello. Then she smiled over her shoulder at Screech and said, "Don't worry. We won't let the couch attack you anymore. Right, Zack?"

Running a hand through his blond hair, Zack smiled. Then he gently socked Kelly on the

head with a pillow. "Not when the couch can attack you!"

"Pillow fight!" Screech screeched.

"Nope, no fighting," said Zack, tousling Kelly's hair. "'Tis the season, you know."

Just then Leslie Burke came in from the girls' room. "'Tis the season is right," she said, going over to the CD player. "Any requests for Christmas music?"

Leslie had more CDs than anyone Kelly had ever known. In fact, Leslie had more clothes, books—and money—than anyone Kelly had ever known. Leslie was rich. The kind of rich that meant limousines, private jets, and swimming pools. The kind of rich that meant you got the red-carpet treatment anywhere you went.

Leslie wasn't stuck-up, though. The last thing she wanted was the red-carpet treatment. She just wanted to be treated like everyone else.

Kelly joined her by the CD rack. "How about 'Deck the Halls'? I've been singing it all day."

"Let's see," said Leslie, flipping through the titles. "I don't see that one. Oh, wait, here's a collection of rock 'n' roll Christmas classics. I think it's on here somewhere."

"Great," Kelly said, looking over the list of songs. Then she grinned. "You know what, Leslie? I just had a great idea!"

Kelly turned to face the rest of the suite. "Listen, everyone! Why don't we go caroling later on this week? We can go from suite to suite." Kelly's voice rose with excitement. "We can even go from dorm to dorm. Classroom to classroom! We can spread holiday cheer everywhere!"

Kelly blushed, thinking she sounded like a goody two-shoes. But everybody was already gathering around the CDs, trying to get ideas for songs.

"Good idea, Kelly," Zack said, reaching for her hand and giving it a squeeze. Kelly was beautiful, with her deep blue eyes and long dark hair. But it was her heart of gold that Zack loved most.

"Yeah," said Slater. He gave Screech a long look. "But when it comes time to actually sing, some of us should just mouth the words."

"What do you mean?" Screech said, his voice rising a few octaves. "Is there something wrong with my voice?"

Alex took a step back from the others. "Besides just singing, I know what we could do! A dramatic reading. Listen to this!"

"Silent night," she intoned. "Holy—"

"Cow," Slater interrupted teasingly. "Can't you give this drama stuff a rest for just one minute?"

"Wait!" said Leslie, jumping up to shine the floor lamp on Alex. "Let's give her what she wants. A spotlight."

"Oh, you guys," said Alex. Then she switched to her best acting voice—a clipped British accent. "Whereforever you find good company, good friends, good times, you find my mates of the suite."

"Hear, hear!" cheered Screech, running to the refrigerator for cans of soda. One by one, he popped them open and handed them out.

"To my mates of the suite," he said, imitating Alex.

Everyone clinked cans, and Kelly's heart swelled. She reached for Zack's hand. She was in love with the greatest guy in the world. She was with her closest friends. And she was having a great time. Who could ask for a better start to the holiday season?

Just then the phone rang. Kelly broke away from Zack to answer it. "Happy holidays!"

"Kelly, is that you?"

"Jessie? I can't believe it! I was just thinking about close friends—and here you are calling."

Jessie? Alex's ears perked up. *Slater's old girlfriend from Bayside, Jessie?* She moved closer.

Everyone else moved closer, too. Jessie was always full of surprises. Headstrong, quick to speak her mind no matter the consequences—Jessie Spano was always interesting.

"She sounds excited about something," Kelly said in a whisper, holding her hand over the receiver.

"What's going on?" Zack asked.

"Is she in trouble again?" Slater asked. "Thrown in prison for picketing a nuclear power plant? Or for protesting against fur coats? No, I know what it is. She's calling collect from a rain forest."

"What's that you're saying, Jessie?" Kelly pushed everyone away so she could talk without interruption. "You're talking too fast. I can't hear you."

Kelly was silent for a moment, while everyone else strained to hear Jessie's voice on the other end. Suddenly, a stricken look crossed Kelly's face. Just when the suite was settling down. Just when everything felt so right.

Jessie Spano was coming to visit.

chapter 2

Jessie was coming to visit? Kelly gripped the phone tighter, struck dumb by the thought. Would she stay with them? In the suite? Glancing at the curious faces surrounding her—Alex and Slater in particular—Kelly saw her hopes for the holidays go up in a puff of smoke.

If Alex and Slater had a stormy relationship, then Jessie and Slater had had a high school romance chock full of hurricanes, tornadoes, and a few other natural disasters thrown in for good measure.

Jessie coming to visit meant trouble. *Trouble,* Kelly thought, *with a capital* T *that rhymes with* C *that stands for Christmas.*

"Kelly?" Jessie's voice on the other end of the line shook Kelly free from her thoughts.

"I'm sorry, Jessie. I just blanked out for a minute."

"That's okay. But you don't sound very excited about my news."

Kelly took the portable phone and went into the girls' room, closing the door behind her. She needed some privacy.

"Of course I'm thrilled. And you're more than welcome to stay with us." Kelly was speaking carefully. She didn't want to hurt Jessie's feelings, but she was secretly hoping that she wouldn't accept the invitation. Jessie, Slater, and Alex all in the same suite could be a disaster.

"That's very generous of you, Kelly. Are you sure everyone else would want me?" Jessie laughed before Kelly could answer. "Don't worry, Kel. I wouldn't dream of barging in on Slater and what's-her-name—Alex? I've got more important things to worry about."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, classes are over here for the semester. But I've been doing some work for this women's group called Women Unite."

"Oh, I've heard of them," Kelly said. "I saw them on TV, holding a rally in front of some big corporation, demonstrating for equal pay for men and women. Hey, I think they're opening a chapter right here in town."

"That's where I'll be staying—at the local headquarters. Women Unite is sending me on a special assignment."

"Wow!" said Kelly, impressed. "It sounds impor-

tant." All of a sudden, Kelly realized how much she missed Jessie. Her dedication and drive. The way she threw herself into her causes. Jessie was always opening Kelly's eyes to injustice, helping her view things in a new light, or just keeping Kelly on her toes in general.

Suddenly, the truth hit Kelly right between the eyes. She couldn't wait to see Jessie. No matter what kind of trouble her presence could cause.

"I can't really go into everything now," Jessie was telling her. "I've got tons of stuff to do, and not enough time to do it."

"I know what you mean," Kelly said, thinking of finals, her job at the center, and all the Christmas plans she'd been making. "When are you getting here?"

"Tonight," Jessie said. Then she paused. "Not that I really care or anything," she added hesitantly, "but what's going on with Slater and Alex?"

# # #

"What?" said Slater. Kelly was back in the common room, telling everyone Jessie's news. "Tell me you didn't invite her to stay with us! Please, Kelly!" Slater almost sounded frightened, and Kelly had to smile. Leave it to Jessie to make the super-strong wrestling champ tremble.

"As a matter of fact, I did invite her. But Jessie

said she'll be staying at the Women Unite headquarters off campus."

"Is that some sort of feminist mumbo-jumbo group?" Slater asked, shaking his head and regaining his composure. "Leave it to Jessie to go off on some mission to change the world."

"Maybe she doesn't want to change the world—only Cal U," Screech said helpfully.

Slater gave Screech a dirty look, then lay back on the couch. "Just wake me when she leaves," he joked, covering his face with a pillow.

Zack lifted the pillow. "Come on, Slater. We all know that you and Jessie have been through a lot together. And not all of it was great. Okay, not all of it was good. Okay, okay—some it was pretty darn lousy. But you've got to get over it. You've got to get rid of the old baggage you've been carrying around."

"Excuse me, Zack, but are you calling Jessie a suitcase? And she's not old—she's our age," Screech piped up.

Zack ignored him. "We're mature college men now, Slater. We should be able to deal with old loves, new loves, and, uh, all that stuff." Zack carefully avoided looking at Alex as he spoke. "Besides, deep down, you know you admire Jessie."

Slater sighed. It was true, he did respect Jessie.

But he had lots of other feelings about her, too—most of them clashingly at odds with one another. True, she was dedicated. But she was also bullheaded. And sure, she was honest. But she could be obnoxious, as well. When it came to Jessie Spano, Slater didn't know what to think. He covered his face with the pillow again.

"That was some speech," Kelly told Zack, nudging him into a corner of the room.

"I meant every word of it. We're not in high school anymore. We're in college. And college relationships should be different from high school ones—deeper, more meaningful. Based on real emotion. Our relationship will be better now, Kel. We won't be so quick to fight or take offense because we're more sure of our feelings. Maybe Slater's not sure of his—and that's the problem. He doesn't know what to think about Jessie. But I'm glad she's coming."

Besides, Zack added to himself, ***having Jessie around will really cement my relationship with Kelly. It'll be just like old times, back when Kelly was crazy about me and I could do no wrong.***

Actually, Zack couldn't wait for Jessie to visit.

Kelly moved closer and put her arms around his neck. "It's funny, Zack. But you can still surprise me after all these years." Her blue eyes sparkled as

she leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Slater tossed the pillow at them. "Break it up, you two." He turned to Alex and Leslie. "You girls have been awfully quiet through all this. What do you think about Jessie visiting?"

Alex and Leslie exchanged looks, both thinking the same thing: not another Baysider!

"I'm sure I'll like Jessie," Leslie said, taking a seat next to Slater. "It's just . . ." Leslie trailed off. How could she say what she was really feeling? That she was afraid Jessie would come between Leslie and Alex and the rest of the suite? That the old Bayside ties would prove stronger than the new Cal U ones? It would sound so juvenile!

"Oh, Les." Understanding everything, Kelly came over and gave her a hug. "I know we Baysiders can be pretty overwhelming at times. But we're all really close now. Our friendship is just as important. Besides," she added, "I know everyone will really hit it off."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Alex finally muttered. She hadn't said one word till now—she'd just been intently scrubbing the kitchen counter, trying to remove a stain that had been there since they'd moved in.

"Why are you being so quiet, Alex? And why are

you cleaning?" Slater asked her. "That isn't like you—on both counts."

"Not like me?" Alex cried, flinging the sponge to the floor.

"That's more like it," said Slater.

"Oh!" But that was all Alex could manage to say. For once, she was speechless. Not only would she have to deal with another good buddy from Bayside, she'd have to deal with her ex-boyfriend's ex-girlfriend. And judging from everything she'd heard about Jessie, Alex was willing to bet she wouldn't like her one bit.

"What do you think, Screech?" Leslie asked.

Screech was leaning back in an armchair, a dreamy expression on his face. All the talk about Jessie and Bayside had gotten him thinking about high school.

At Bayside High, Screech was just a skinny funny-looking kid who wore mismatched clothes. He was into science, math, and chess—and totally in love with pretty Lisa Turtle: fashion plate, makeup expert, and shopping consultant at large.

True, Lisa really valued Screech's friendship. And maybe deep down inside, Screech had realized even then that Lisa would never like him in *that* way. Still, he'd refused to give up, proclaiming his love again and again, following Lisa everywhere, and making a general pest of himself.

Ah, Screech thought now, stretching his arms above his head. *Why did I refuse to face the truth? Was it a sign of immaturity? Who knows? I probably wasn't even in love. Not really. What I had was a crush, pure and simple.*

Screech tucked his paisley shirt into his high-waisted slacks and smiled.

"Things have really changed for you in college, Screech m'boy," he told himself. "Lisa's out of the picture—and Susan Jarvis is in."

Screech could just picture Susan running through a field of daisies: long dark hair flowing behind her, hazel eyes filled with love, as she fell into his waiting arms. Her old boyfriends—blond surfer dudes, muscular football players, and a bevy of male models—would be crying out for her. But she'd only have eyes for one guy: Screech Powers.

"Oh, Samuel," she would say. "There's never been anyone but you."

Yep, no more unrealistic crushes for me, Screech thought. "Oh, Susan," he said out loud. "Susan, Susan, Susan."

"Oh, Screech, Screech, Screech," said a soft voice in answer. A loving hand caressed his face.

With a start, Screech opened his eyes. Zack was standing over him, and everyone was laughing.

"Hey," Screech said, jumping up. "No fair listening in on my daydreams."

"Were you dreaming about Susan Jarvis down the hall?" Zack asked. "Susan who won't give anyone the time of day unless he's a BMOC?"

"BMOC? What does a Big Moth on Campus have to do with anything?"

"It's Big Man on Campus, Screech."

"Oh." Screech was silent for a minute. "Well, don't be so quick to count me out of the running. I have my own special way of turning heads, you know."

Screech caught sight of a sprig of mistletoe on the kitchen counter. Mistletoe! The universal sign to pucker up and kiss. Maybe he should just walk around holding it over his head. Then, when he saw Susan, she'd get the idea right away. He grabbed it.

"This is just an experiment," he told the others, waving it overhead. "But what do you think?"

Just then Mike Rogers, the dorm's resident assistant, poked his head in the room. He did a double take when he saw Screech dancing around with the mistletoe. "I think I'll pass on the Christmas smooch," he told Screech. "But thanks, anyway, pal."

"Hey, Mike, my man," said Slater, making room for the big guy on the couch. "Did you catch the 49ers' game? Steve Young made this one incredible pass . . ."

Mike Rogers was always ready to discuss football. A former player for San Francisco until an

injury sidelined him and he decided to go back to school, Mike would get the inside dope on the NFL team and pass it along to the guys. Next to wrestling, football was Slater's favorite sport, and he was planning on going out for the team next year.

"How do you think the Falcons will do in the game tomorrow?" he asked Mike.

"Yeah," said Leslie. "It's a really big one, isn't it?"

"Huge," Mike said. "If they can pull this one off, they'll have a good record with just one more game left in the regular season. And if they win that one . . . they'll go into the finals. Imagine! For the first time in twenty years, Cal U will be in the finals."

Kelly and Zack were leaning against the kitchen counter. Kelly was talking in a low voice, trying to tell Zack her real concerns about Jessie's visit. "Do you see what I mean, Zack? . . . Zack?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure, Kel." Zack patted her arm absentmindedly and strained to listen to Mike's analysis of the Cal U team.

"Oh, just go over there," Kelly said, giving Zack a playful push toward the couch. "Everyone knows football is the most important thing there is. I don't know why I'm surprised. After all, you barely let your autographed football out of your sight."

Kelly had spoken louder than she intended. Overhearing, Mike sat up straight. "What do you mean autographed football?"

"Zack has a football signed by all the NFL quarterbacks," Kelly explained. "He won it in a charity raffle when we were in high school, and it's his prized possession."

Mike's eyes widened. "You have Montana?"

Zack nodded.

"Warren Moon?"

Again Zack nodded.

"Dan Marino?"

"I have everybody. Here, let me show you." Zack went into his bedroom and returned a second later carrying the football. He tossed it to Mike.

Mike caught it with one hand and grabbed Zack's arm with the other. "I've got to have it! What will you sell it for?"

"Sorry, it's not for sale, Mike. That football means too much to me."

Slater grinned. "Yep, nothing is as important as that football. Everything takes a backseat to it, right, Zack? Even our own Fighting Falcons team."

"Even Christmas," Kelly put in.

"Christmas!" Mike slapped his head. "I forgot—that's why I came over in the first place!"

Still cradling the football, Mike reached into his back pocket. He pulled out a bright-red Santa hat with a pom-pom on the end, then stuck it jauntily on his head.

"I'm here as Santa's official messenger," he said.

"Well then, you must be the biggest elf on the North Pole." Screech eyed his massive form. "Tell me, how do you fit in those little elf beds?"

Mike gave him a dirty look. "I was talking figuratively."

"That's how I was talking. With your figure, how do you survive on those little elf meals?"

"They're not that bad—" Mike began. Then he stood up, an exasperated expression on his face. "How do I get pulled into these ridiculous conversations?" he asked.

"By Santa's reindeer?" Screech suggested innocently.

"Enough!" Mike went to the door. "I just want to let everyone know about the dorm meeting tonight. We're going to be planning all sorts of holiday celebrations, and you guys better show. Because I promise, we'll really be shaking things up around here."

"Hey, great!" said Alex.

"We'll be there," Leslie and Slater said at the same time.

"Do you think Susan will show?" Screech put in.

Kelly didn't say a word. What did Mike have in mind? Shaking things up might not be the best idea in the world. Not with Jessie coming and things already feeling unsettled.

Jessie and Christmas. Two wild cards. Who knew what would happen?

"You okay about this, Kelly?" Mike asked, halfway out the door.

"Sure," said Kelly as heartily as she could.

"But *I'm* not okay about it." Zack strode toward Mike.

"Why, Zack, what's the matter?" Mike said, looking innocent.

"Come on, give it up."

"Give what up?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"Oh, you mean this?" Mike handed the football back to Zack, then gave him a playful punch on the arm. "Sorry, pal. Guess I just forgot I had it!"

chapter 3

The dorm lounge was filling up quickly for the meeting. People were jockeying for seats, talking, laughing, and passing around snacks. Screech smoothed down his hair and peered into the room from the doorway. One of the last people to arrive, he looked around anxiously. Where was Susan?

Screech hadn't meant to be so late. Two hours before the dorm meeting was scheduled to begin, he was already stepping into the shower. He'd bought a new shampoo especially for the occasion, Sea Kelp Plus—"guaranteed to give you oceans of body"—and he was eager to try it out. But one hour before the meeting, Screech was back in the shower, trying to rinse the strange green tint out of his hair and get rid of a seaweedy smell.

Actually, Screech kind of liked the idea of seaweed hair. If a girl smelled like that, it would make him think of sunsets on the beach and romantic ocean voyages. But Kelly had sniffed him for a

minute, then had gone into the kitchen to heat up a can of chowder.

"I'm not sure why I'm in the mood for fish," she had said.

That did it. Screech had jumped back in the shower. The last thing he wanted was for Susan to get a craving for tuna salad on rye when she saw him at the meeting. *He* wanted to be the catch of the day.

Then, when he'd finished with his second shower, Screech still had to decide what to wear. A tie? Suspenders? A snazzy new beret? Screech wanted Susan to notice him. Finally, going for the understated look, he settled on a freshly pressed purple shirt, plaid slacks, and a pair of golf shoes. For good measure, he put on a button that read TAKE A GENIUS OUT TO LUNCH.

But now, because getting ready had taken so long, Screech couldn't find a seat anywhere near Susan.

"I guess I'll just have to sit next to you," he grumbled, dropping into a spot on the floor next to Kelly.

Kelly leaned closer for another sniff. "I don't know, Screech. I'm not sure you washed all that gook out of your hair."

"What difference does it make?" Screech sounded glum. "Susan's all the way on the other side of

the room. To her, I'm just another good-looking guy who's out of reach—and out of smelling range."

Kelly glanced at Susan, who was giggling with some of her suitemates. Susan's eyes swept over the room in an appraising way, looking through Screech as if he didn't exist. All Susan's friends looked just like Susan—perfectly made up, perfectly dressed, perfectly stuck-up. But Kelly took a second look at Susan's roommate Carla. With her friendly freckled face, she seemed different from the others. Nice.

Just then Mike Rogers, still wearing his Santa's hat, called for everybody's attention.

"Now, I know everyone has a lot going on these days," he said. "There are finals to take, Christmas lists to write, vacation plans to make. Oh, yeah—and football games to win."

A cheer went through the crowd, and Slater stood up to start a wave.

"But this is a very special time of year," Mike continued once everybody had settled down. "And I think our dorm should do something special, too. I have some ideas I'd like to tell you about. First of all, how does a formal Christmas dinner sound?"

"A formal Christmas dinner? Does that mean the turkey wears a tux?" Screech whispered to Kelly.

"Shhh," said Kelly, quickly hushing him. This is what she'd dreamed Christmas in college would be like—formal dinners, romantic gatherings—and

she wanted to hear every word Mike was saying. If this was Mike's idea of shaking things up, she was all for it.

"I think it sounds great," Zack announced, gazing at Kelly. "And I already know who my date is going to be."

"That's terrific, Morris," said Mike. "I'm sure everyone's real interested in your social life, but the real question is, when should we have it?"

"We'll have it next Saturday night!" said one of Susan's suitemates, Dawn, in an authoritative voice. "That's the night before the dorms close for vacation."

"Does anyone have any objections?" Mike looked around the room. "No? Then it's set. And if the Falcons win tomorrow—and next Saturday—we'll really have something to celebrate."

Slater started to get up for another wave, but Alex pulled him down. "I want to hear the other plans!" she hissed.

"Next on the agenda," said Mike, leafing through some papers he was holding, "is Secret Santa."

"What do you mean 'secret'?" Screech said loudly. "Everyone knows who Santa is—he's the jolly old guy in a red suit hanging out in department stores, on street corners, on TV. The guy is everywhere!"

Mike shook his head. "Secret Santa is just a nice, inexpensive way for people in the dorm to

give one another Christmas gifts. Anyone who wants to sign up should put their name in my Santa hat. Then everyone will pick a name out of the hat, and that's the person they give a little gift to. The catch is, it's all a secret. They can't reveal who they are until . . ."

"The night of the Christmas dinner!" Kelly finished triumphantly.

"Right!" Mike handed out pens and sheets of paper. "Anyone interested, write your name down, crumple up the paper, and come up here to put it in my hat."

Screech looked at everybody busily scribbling their names on paper. The whole dorm was doing it. "Good thing you have such a big head, Mike!" he called out.

* * *

A little while later, Mike was holding out his hat as a line of people filed past, reaching in one by one for a slip of paper.

"You know, Zack," Kelly said right before it was her turn to choose a name. "This might be our most romantic Christmas ever. A formal dinner, a tree in our very own suite. And wouldn't it be amazing if we picked each other's names out of the hat?"

Zack started to count heads. "There must be a hundred people doing this," he told her. "What are the chances?"

"That's what would make it so romantic." Kelly smiled, standing on tiptoe to give Zack a kiss.

"All right, you two lovebirds," said Mike, waving the Santa hat in their faces. "Time to draw your names."

Kelly closed her eyes and reached into the bag to shuffle the crumpled papers around.

"Come on, come on," someone grumbled from behind. "We haven't got all night."

Kelly turned around. It was Susan. "That's okay, Kel," Zack whispered. "Take your time. Concentrate on Zack Morris. Zack Morris."

Finally, Kelly pulled out a piece of paper. She took it to a relatively deserted corner to read the name in private. Two seconds later, Zack joined her. "Who'd you get?" he asked.

Kelly held the piece of paper tightly in her hand. "This is *Secret* Santa, right?"

"Right."

"So I'm not giving any secrets away."

"Me, neither," Zack announced, still trying to sneak a look at Kelly's paper. "Me, neither."

Kelly smiled. "It's really no big deal. I got that girl, Dawn Farber. Susan's suitemate."

Leslie and Alex came over just then, squealing about their Secret Santa names, and slowly, Zack walked away. Kelly snuck one last look at the paper before she tore it into little bits.

Okay, so the name isn't Dawn Farber, she thought. *It's really Zack Morris. But what's one little lie when you want to surprise your boyfriend?*

▫ ▫ ▫

Zack made his way through the room, eyeing friends and acquaintances along the way. Who had Kelly's name?

"Hey, preppie!" said Slater, stepping in front of him. "You look like a man on a mission."

"I am. I'm trying to find out who drew Kelly's name from the hat. I want to switch with them."

"Well, don't look at me. Lucky ole me got Mike Rogers. There really should have been some sort of rule—girls get guys and guys get girls."

Slater looked at Screech, who was coming over, his mouth turned down in frustration. "Seems like Screech would agree with me on that one."

"On what one?" said Screech.

"Girl Secret Santas give gifts to guys and vice versa."

"I did get a girl. I just got the wrong girl."

Screech showed them his slip of paper: Kelly Kapowski.

Zack's face lit up. "Hey, if you don't care, I'll trade you." He checked his paper again. "I have Donald Stark."

"Why would I want to be Donald Stark's Secret Santa?" Screech pointed to Donald, a short, bug-

eyed guy gesturing madly to a curly-haired blond on the other side of the room. "I might as well stick with Kelly." Screech sighed. "If only I had Susan."

A light bulb went up over Zack's head. He was back in business now; all he had to do was get ahold of Susan's name and trade it with Screech for Kelly's.

"Don't move a muscle, Screech. I'll be right back."

Zack scanned the room. First things first. He'd have to figure out who had Susan's name. Trying to look casual, he strolled through the lounge, eavesdropping on as many conversations as possible.

"Who'd you get?"

"Ugh. Adam Elberg. How about you?"

"Lori Simmons."

"Hey, this is great. I have Rick Benjamin," a girl named Terry said.

"I have Danielle Calley. Who's Danielle Calley?"

"Oh, look at mine," Melissa, a tall brunette, moaned. "I've got Dave Theorelli, but I was hoping for Paul Landman."

Zack made some mental notes and continued on.

At last he heard someone say, "I can't believe I got my own suitemate. What's the fun in that?"

Making his way through the crowd, Zack saw it was Dawn Farber. Bingo!

"Excuse me," he said with his most ingratiating smile. "I couldn't help overhearing. You're not happy with your Secret Santa person?"

Dawn looked at Zack—handsome, smiling, friendly—and smiled back. "Well, I just thought it would be more fun to have someone else—someone I want to get to know. I mean, I already know Susan pretty well, considering we live together."

So it *was* Susan!

"How do you feel about Donald Stark? Would you want to switch with me?"

"Donald Stark-raving mad? No thanks."

Of course. That would have been too easy, Zack thought. "Well, who would you want?"

Dawn looked around, considering. "Rick Benjamin's kind of cute."

Rick Benjamin—tall, muscular, and dumb-looking.

"Okay. Stay right where you are," he told Dawn. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

He raced over to Terry, the girl who'd said she'd picked Rick Benjamin.

"I'll trade you Donald Stark for Rick," Zack offered.

The girl looked at him like he was crazy. "Why would I do that?"

"I'll throw in twenty bucks," Zack said, beginning to get desperate.

"Well, maybe I would do it for thirty. But only if it was Dave Theorelli."

"You got it," Zack said excitedly. "Now, don't move. This will only take a minute." Before Zack did anything else, he had to get rid of Donald Stark.

"Excuse me, pardon me." Zack muscled his way through the lounge until he came to the curly-haired blond who was talking earlier to Donald Stark.

"You know," he said casually, as if he were continuing a conversation they'd already started, "I really think you and Donald look cute together. And I can tell you, he's a heck of a nice guy."

The blond leaned forward anxiously. "You really think so? Everyone seems to think he's a little crazy. But I think he's intense."

"Oh, he's very intense. And I can see he's intense about you."

The girl grinned.

"You probably want to show him how intense you are," Zack went on encouragingly. "The only question is how."

"How?" the girl echoed.

"With your Secret Santa gifts! I just happen to have a slip of paper with one Donald Stark's name on it. How'd you like to be his Secret Santa?"

"I'd love it!" the girl said. "But what about the person I already chose?"

Zack looked at the name: Paul Landman, as in "I've got Dave Theorelli, but I was hoping for Paul Landman." Perfect!

"I'll just take that off your hands. An even exchange, and no one will ever have to know."

The blond girl handed her paper to Zack. Zack took it and ran to Melissa, the tall brunette who'd drawn Dave Theorelli's name but wanted Paul's. He gave her Paul, took Dave, and raced back to Terry.

"I have Dave Theorelli," he said, out of breath. "Now, can I have Rick Benjamin?"

The girl held out her hand. "My thirty bucks?"

"All right, all right." Zack hastily reached into his pocket, and threw some crumpled bills at her. "That's all I have on me now. But I'm good for it."

Carefully, the girl counted the money. "You owe me twelve dollars," she said, handing him Rick Benjamin's name.

Immediately, Zack took off. "I have it! I have it!" Zack was panting as he gave Rick's name to Dawn. "Now can I have Susan's?"

An instant later, Zack found Screech in the same exact position as he had left him. "Well, you told me not to move a muscle," Screech explained, trying to talk without moving his mouth.

"Forget it, Screech. Guess who I'm holding in my hot little hand?"

"Well, it must be somebody awfully small. And if your hand's so hot, you'd better let them out."

"Come on, Screech, be serious. I have Susan's name. And I'm willing to trade it."

"Susan?" Screech said, talking normally and relaxing his stiff muscles. "You really have Susan?"

"Sure, good buddy. Now, if you'll just give me Kelly's name, everyone will be happy."

"Did I hear you mention my name?" Kelly said, coming over with the rest of their suitemates.

"I'm always mentioning your name, Kel," Zack said quickly. "That way, even when we're separated, I feel close to you."

"How sweet," said Slater. "But speaking of sweet, let's go back to the suite for some dessert. Alex cooked up another batch of gingerbread cookies."

"Yeah," Leslie said. "And I think this batch turned out really yummy."

All six friends trooped back to the suite. The smell of freshly baked gingerbread filled the hallway.

Slater picked up the pace, hurrying down the hall. "I can't wait to sink my teeth into . . ." He opened the door. "Jessie!"

Jessie looked up from her seat on the couch and smiled.

chapter 4

"Jessie!" Kelly hugged her good friend. "I can't believe you're really here!" Then she hugged her again.

"Give someone else a chance," said Slater, awkwardly putting his arm around Jessie for a moment. "We're all glad to see her."

Jessie's hazel eyes sparkled. Her long, curly hair framed her face, and she fairly glowed with happiness at seeing her friends. Self-consciously, Alex touched her own curly mane, pulled back in a tight ponytail because she hadn't had time to wash it that morning.

"This is like old times," Zack was saying, giving Kelly a significant look. "The Bayside Buddies, together again."

Inwardly, Leslie groaned. If one more person said "Bayside" . . .

"Bayside, Bayside, rah, rah, rah," said Screech, hopping up and down in a poor imitation of a cheerleader. "Yea, Bay—ouch!"

"I'm sorry, Screech," Leslie said sweetly. "I didn't realize my elbow was so close to your stomach."

"Oh," said Kelly, suddenly remembering her new friends. She grabbed ahold of Leslie's and Alex's hands. "Jessie, these are my roommates, Leslie Burke and Alex Tabor."

Jessie smiled. "It's nice to meet you. I've heard so much about both of you."

Alex peered at her closely, trying to read some deeper meaning into the statement. What had she heard exactly? But Jessie seemed genuinely nice. Alex sighed. She couldn't even hate her.

Gazing anxiously at Leslie, then at Alex, and finally back at Jessie, Kelly breathed a sigh of relief. It was pretty obvious, even this early into things, that they were all going to get along. Jessie was admiring Alex's outfit and telling Leslie all about the volunteer work she'd done for the Burke Family Charity Foundation.

Only Slater seemed edgy, bouncing on the balls of his feet and moving his mass of muscles up and down nervously.

"Hey, you," Jessie said softly to him. "It's only me, remember?"

How could Slater forget? Only me—ha! Jessie had meant so much to him in high school. And here she was, looking as good as ever. Taking her in from

head to toe, Slater realized how easy it would be to fall for her all over again. The two locked eyes.

"Hey, you," Slater said in return. "It really is nice to have you here."

The room fell silent. But Slater and Jessie didn't seem to notice. They just kept staring at each other with dopey expressions on their faces.

"Ahem," said Kelly. "Why don't we all sit down so we can really talk? I'll get some milk and soda to go with the gingerbread cookies."

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A few minutes later, everyone was settled comfortably in the common room. Kelly, Zack, and Screech were on the couch. Leslie and Alex were perched on kitchen stools, and Slater and Jessie shared an armchair.

"So . . ." Kelly paused to dunk her cookie in her glass of milk. "What's the deal with Women Unite? And what's this special assignment you're on?"

Jessie laughed. "Did I make it sound that secretive? I should be doing just the opposite, talking up this project to every single person I speak to."

"Why don't you start with me?" Slater said meaningfully, leaning even closer to Jessie.

Alex snapped a gingerbread man in two. The noise made everyone look at her. "Oops, sorry," she said. Really, the last thing she wanted was for Slater to think she was jealous. Because, surprisingly, Alex

wasn't. After all their ups and downs these past few months, Alex wanted something more on an even keel with Slater. She wanted a friendship. And when she looked at him, sitting snugly in the chair with Jessie, all she saw was a suitemate. A friend named A. C. Slater. And as for Jessie? Well, the jury was still out on that. But Alex had the sneaking suspicion that they were going to be friends.

"Go on, Jessie," she said. "What's the project?"

"I'm organizing a protest," Jessie explained, "over school funding. Did you know that 80 percent of the athletics budget here at California University goes to men's sports? Obviously, that leaves only 20 percent for women's teams."

Sensing trouble, Slater shifted away from Jessie, then decided to move to the floor. What was wrong with that budget split? You couldn't expect the money to be divided fifty-fifty between men and women, could you? Not when sports were involved. Slater had to say something; he had to stick up for the guys' point of view. *But remember,* he told himself. *Keep it light. Don't get Jessie mad.*

"Well," he said in an even voice, "speaking as a member of the wrestling team—and quite possibly a future member of the football team—I can say the money's been well spent. Those new wrestling uniforms?" Slater grinned to show he was joking. "You

don't have to tug them down after every hold. They really keep their shape."

"I'm serious, Slater." Jessie stood up and began to pace. "This is an important issue. Why are women being shortchanged? It's time for people to speak up—voice their concerns. We're just as important as men, and it's only fair we get our rightful share of the budget."

"Wow," said Kelly thoughtfully. "I never really thought about it before. You know, back in high school, I was always leading the cheers, not playing the sports. What are you planning to do about it?"

Jessie stopped short. "That's the problem. I don't know what to do. Organize some kind of protest, I guess. Any ideas?"

Uh-oh, thought Slater. *This is all moving a bit too quickly.* It was time to step in with some sweet talk—and a change of subject. Maybe he could get her to drop the whole crazy project.

Slater stood up and draped an arm casually over Jessie's shoulders. "Why are you going to stay in a cold, empty office while you're here, Jess? Stay with us. Your friends. Your amigos. We'll call Mike Rogers and have him bring over a cot."

"A cot? The last time I slept on one of those, I fell off in the middle of the night." Jessie laughed. "Boy, a cot!"

Abruptly, Jessie pulled away from Slater. "Wait a minute! What did I just say? Boy? Cot? That's it!"

"What's it?" said Slater, confused.

"A boycott! We can boycott a football game." She turned to Slater. "What's the schedule for the rest of the semester?"

Reluctantly, Slater told her: a game tomorrow morning, and if that one ended in victory, a game the following Saturday to decide if Cal U would make the finals.

"Hmm," said Jessie. "Looks like I won't have time to do anything by tomorrow except hand out some leaflets."

"But what if the Falcons win?" Kelly put in. "That'll give you one whole week to get the boycott organized for next Saturday's game, and it'll be a much bigger deal because it's a much bigger game!"

Zack shot her a look. He already had tickets lined up for that last game. He'd been planning on surprising Kelly with them later in the week. But it wouldn't be much of a surprise if she joined the boycott and refused to go.

"That's right, Kel. Thanks. And thanks to you, too, Slater, for giving me the idea." Jessie gave him a peck on the cheek. "But I better head to the Women Unite office right now. I've got a million things to do!"

# # #

After Jessie left, the room was strangely quiet. Everyone was sizing up the situation.

Kelly cuddled up close to Zack. "What do you think about the boycott?"

"I think if Jessie believes that strongly in equality for men's and women's sports, she should focus on professional teams. College sports is small potatoes." Zack grinned. *Not a bad way to sidestep the issue,* he thought.

"Come on, Zack," Slater said, annoyed. "Take a real stand. You know as well as I do that in the grand scheme of things, women's sports mean nada. Nothing."

"Wait just a minute, now." Alex stood up, her hands on her hips. "That's a ridiculous statement. Why are women's sports so insignificant? Are women insignificant? You're practically saying women aren't as good as men, Slater. That we're inferior or something."

"Not at all," said Zack, trying to smooth things over. He could feel Kelly tense up next to him and knew he'd better tread carefully. "But look all around. You don't see network TV carrying women's basketball games. And are there any female football teams? I don't think so."

Zack started to talk faster, really getting into it. "Can you just see that? Women's football? 'Oh, I'm already having a bad hair day. Do I really have to

wear that nasty helmet?'" he squeaked in a high, girlish voice.

Kelly drew away from him, but Zack couldn't stop himself. He was on a roll. "And could you see women hockey players? They'd put those little pom-poms on the ice skates!"

"Good one, preppie," Slater said, giving him a high five.

"You guys can joke all you want," Kelly said, calmly standing up to distance herself from Zack. "But I think Jessie's right. The whole budget thing reeks of sexism. And I'm going to join the boycott!"

"Me, too!" said Alex, jumping up to stand beside her. "Women unite!"

"Yeah!" Screech raised his fist. "Women unite!"

"What?" said Zack, surprised. "Screech, you're siding with them?"

"You're darn right I'm siding with them." Screech nodded his head vehemently. "You know, there are other sports besides football and basketball and baseball. There's miniature golf and Ping-Pong! And I think it's about time those teams got a share of the budget."

Slater snickered. "Would this have anything to do with the fact that *you're* on the miniature golf and Ping-Pong teams?"

"So what if I am? They're legitimate sports—

with coed teams. And what do we get from the athletics budget? I'll tell you."

Leslie, who hadn't said a word till then, stood up, too, cutting off Screech's speech. "Hardly anything," she answered for him slowly. "But there's a reason for it."

Leslie paused, carefully considering what she'd say. Then she continued. "Listen," she said to Kelly, Alex, and Screech. "We have to be realistic about things. College is real life, and real life isn't perfect."

"What do you mean?" said Alex.

"This isn't only about girls versus boys. There are very real issues here. Issues concerning money. I should know—I've been around money and finance all my life. My father runs one of the biggest businesses in the world, and he doesn't always do what he'd like to do. . . . He does what's best for the company."

"I still don't get it," said Alex.

"If football, basketball, and other men's teams stop getting financial support, they won't be able to give athletic scholarships," Leslie explained. "So they wouldn't be able to get the best high school players. Then the teams would stop winning and people would stop caring. Alumni would lose interest in the games and, along with it, in the school. They'd stop donating money. The school would be in trouble. In fact, the financial structure of the whole school could be in trouble."

"Wow," said Zack admiringly. "I couldn't have said it better myself. And may I add—"

"No," Kelly said, interrupting. "I want to ask Leslie a question. Does this mean you're against the boycott?"

"I'm afraid so." Leslie spoke slowly. It had been a tough choice.

"I don't believe you!" Alex said hotly. "You're siding with these morons?"

Suddenly, everyone started talking at once, pointing fingers, shouting insults, stamping their feet. The mistletoe hanging over the door fell to the floor with a soft thud. No one noticed.

Kelly, taking a breath, looked around the room. Was the suite really divided over this? Sure enough, people had literally taken sides. She was standing with Alex and Screech on one side of the room; Leslie was with Zack and Slater on the other. The air between the groups crackled with tension. The peaceful holiday spirit of just a short while ago was totally destroyed.

Kelly sighed. There was no getting around it: The suite *was* divided.

The noise level grew to deafening proportions. *Maybe "divided" isn't the right word,* Kelly thought, holding her ears. *Maybe the suite is at war. A civil war.* Nevertheless, Kelly crossed her fingers behind her back. There was still time for a cease-fire.

chapter 5

"Earth to Slater. Earth to Slater." Marlene, the manager of the Falcon's Nest, was waving her hand in front of Slater's face, trying to get his attention.

"Come in, Slater. It's lunchtime. We're going to be extra busy today. And in case you've forgotten, you work here."

The Falcon's Nest, the gang's favorite campus hangout, was already filling up with shouting students, and Slater knew he had to get his act together.

Slater shook his head apologetically. "Sorry, Marlene. I guess I was daydreaming."

He stole another glance at Jessie, who was sitting alone at a corner table. Jessie was hunched over, scribbling furiously in a notebook with one hand, while she leafed through some papers with the other. Slater was sure she was going over her ideas for a boycott.

Did it bother him? Slater wasn't sure. Jessie

looked so pretty, her nose crinkled up with concentration, it was hard to think straight.

Once again, Slater was off in dreamland, thinking about Jessie at another favorite hangout, the Max in Palisades. He and Jessie sipping Cokes . . . sharing fries . . . laughing, talking, having fun.

"Well, snap out of it," Marlene demanded, interrupting his thoughts a second time. She angrily snapped her fingers. "I don't pay you to daydream."

You barely pay me at all, Slater thought, his vision clearing. Grabbing an order pad and his apron, he hurried off to do his job.

Quickly, Slater cleared a table close to Jessie and motioned a waiting couple to take a seat. The guy was Ken Danvers, quarterback for the Fighting Falcons.

"Hey, Ken! How'd the Falcons do?" Slater asked, suddenly remembering the game had been that morning. No wonder the Falcon's Nest was hopping.

How could I forget something like that? he wondered. Jessie tossed her head, and Slater instantly knew the answer: He'd been too busy thinking of one Jessie Spano. Slater noticed the football coach, Coach Saroyan, walking into the restaurant, too. He'd better get an attitude adjustment if he was going to impress the driving force behind the team.

"We killed 'em," Ken answered, raising his arms in victory before sitting down. "The rest of the team should be crowding in any minute, man, and they're going to be hungry!"

"Huh?" Slater had been giving Ken only half of his attention. He'd been watching Jessie again. She *was* filling out paperwork for Women Unite.

"That's great!" Slater said, as the news sank in. "Congratulations!"

"Well, we didn't really kill them. The game was actually pretty close," Ken admitted. He cast a look at the coach. "Slater, you have to give some serious thought to trying out for the team. We could use you, man."

"I will. But right now, these tables need me more. I'd better get moving."

Slater passed by Coach Saroyan and gave him the thumbs-up sign. "One more game next Saturday," he said, "and we go to the finals!"

Suddenly, Slater felt that old familiar rush of excitement. The kind of feeling he had as Bayside High's quarterback, with two minutes left to go and the score tied. Football—there really wasn't anything like it. Then, just as suddenly, Slater felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach; the kind of sensation he got when he walked in to take a test unprepared and didn't know what would happen.

This win means Jessie goes for the boycott, he reminded himself.

Slater's eyes ran over the room. People were really crowding into the restaurant now. A big group of football players squeezed around the table next to Jessie's. Football versus Women Unite. His football buds versus Jessie. His loyalties were with the team, right? Just then Jessie smiled and waved.

Should I pretend I don't see her? Slater moved from table to table, taking orders and trying to decide how to handle the situation. *Or should I do Coach Saroyan a favor and spill dirty dishwater all over her papers?*

He sighed. *Maybe I should just ask her out tonight.* After all, everyone in the suite had calmed down about the boycott issue. Maybe it wasn't such a big deal.

Not knowing what was going to come out of his mouth, Slater made his way over to Jessie.

"Hi," he said, sounding miserable.

Jessie looked at him curiously. "What's wrong, Slater? You seem like you've lost your best friend."

"Who, me?" Slater shrugged his broad shoulders. "Mr. Happy-go-lucky?"

"Oh, come on. You're talking to *me,*" Jessie said, gently. "Remember when we could tell each other anything?"

Forgetting the Falcon's Nest, his job, and everybody else—including Coach Saroyan, who was waving at him to mop up a spilled drink—Slater sat down next to Jessie.

"I miss those times," he said.

"Me, too. It's funny. High school wasn't that long ago. But it seems like a lifetime has passed since we used to hang out at the Max."

Slater nodded. "I know. We've both been through a lot since graduation. New friends. New lives."

"Doesn't the old life mean anything?"

"Sure it does." Slater edged closer. Jessie's hazel eyes were staring at him intently, and his heart was doing flip-flops. "Maybe we can get some of the old life back."

Jessie put her hand on Slater's arm. "Which part?"

By the time Marlene called Slater back to work, it was set. Jessie and Slater had a date that night.

"And don't worry about the bill," he said as he rushed off. "Lunch is on the house."

Slater was falling for Jessie all over again.

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Screech put his fingers in his ears. "My sensitive hearing can't stand all this noise," he said, complaining to Zack as they threaded their way through

bustling crowds at the mall. "Maybe we should do our Christmas shopping through the Home Buying Network and our trusty telephone."

"Come on, Screech," Zack said cheerfully. "Going to the mall is half the fun of Christmas." He waved to a line of children waiting to sit on Santa's lap. "You can't miss things like this!"

"Oh! I didn't know Santa was here!" Screech stopped walking, and a light came into his eyes. "You know, Zack, why don't you go on ahead? I'll meet you later."

Zack grinned. "You're going to tell Santa what you want for Christmas?"

Screech didn't answer. He was already in line. "It can't hurt!" he called back to Zack.

Zack ambled over to the mall directory. He and Screech were there to buy their first Secret Santa gifts, and he needed some ideas.

Running a hand over the list of stores, Zack thought, *Now, what would Kelly want? Clothes? Books? Jewelry?* Whatever the gift, Zack was determined to go all out. Maybe that would ease the tension between them. Ever since Jessie had come to Cal U, things had been a little strained.

Kelly's just being too sensitive, Zack thought. *All I did was crack a few jokes about women being the weaker sex, and Kelly is all up in arms. And I was only kidding!* What he needed was a thoughtful

gift. One that would make Kelly realize how much he cared when she found out he was her Secret Santa.

Zack looked at the map. The jewelry store was just a few feet away. He'd start there.

A minute later, Zack was talking to a salesperson. "I'm looking for a special gift for my girlfriend. Something that could only come from me."

"Well, let's see," the woman said. "How about one of our lovely rings? We carry only the best, you know."

Zack looked over the selection. Nothing leaped out at him and shouted, "Buy me for Kelly!" Suddenly, something in the same case caught his eye. It was a gold megaphone charm. Right away, Zack knew it was the perfect gift. Kelly could wear it with the gold chain her mom had bought her for graduation.

"I'd like to take a look at that megaphone, please," Zack told the saleswoman.

When Zack held the charm in his hand, it felt so right he had to smile. And he knew just what to do with it, too. He'd get it engraved: "To Kelly, a sweetheart of a high school cheerleader."

The coupling of "high school" and "sweetheart" might give away that he was Kelly's Secret Santa, but Zack thought the secret part wasn't that important.

"After all, if I'm spending all this cash . . . ," he

said to himself, flipping over the price tag for a look. "Uh-oh. Too much cash. I don't have that kind of money!"

Just then Screech came over. "Hey," he said. "These gifts are supposed to be inexpensive and fun. Not 14-karat gold!"

Zack coughed. "I was just checking it out. But you're right, Screech, my man." Zack turned to the saleswoman. "Thanks very much, but it's not quite what I'm looking for."

"So," Zack continued as he and Screech headed back into the Christmas-shopping crowd. "What did you ask Santa for? I bet it had something to do with Susan!"

"That is between me and Mr. Claus," Screech said indignantly. "It's privileged information."

"Well, at least you can spill the beans about your Secret Santa gift. I already know you're getting something for Susan. I'm the one who arranged it, remember? So what are you thinking about?"

Screech scratched his head. "I don't know," he admitted. "So much depends on these gifts. I want to get her something so amazing that she'll never forget it—or me."

All of a sudden, Screech realized he was talking to himself. "Zack?"

"In here, Screech." Zack was standing in a toy store, knee-deep in toddlers. "I figured out what I'm

getting Kelly." He took a cuddly stuffed tiger from a high shelf.

"Waaa!" cried a toddler, pointing at the tiger. "Mine!"

"Okay, okay," Zack said, quickly handing it over. He reached for another stuffed animal—a lion. This time, a little girl ran over and smiled, holding out her arms. Zack smiled back. How could he resist? He knelt down and gave it to her.

Finally, Zack reached for an adorable penguin and quickly stuffed it under his jacket so no one would see it. Then he went straight to the cashier and handed it over.

"Why don't you give Susan a stuffed animal?" he asked Screech. "Kelly loves 'em. I bet she will, too."

"No, a stuffed animal is too . . . Wait a minute!" Screech said, interrupting himself. "I can give Susan a real animal. A lab rat from my latest science experiment!"

"A lab rat? Are you sure?"

"Yes! It's unique. It's thoughtful. It says Screech Powers!"

Screech looked at his watch. "Oops. We'd better get going, Zack. Everyone's meeting back at the suite to go Christmas tree shopping."

¤ ¤ ¤

"Money isn't the issue here. It's women's rights!" Kelly and Leslie were standing practically

nose to nose, shouting at each other as Zack and Screech came into the suite.

Uh-oh, thought Zack. Just when everybody was quieting down about the whole thing, somebody had to go and bring up the funding topic again.

"You're just being naive," Leslie was telling Kelly. "You can't shut your eyes to the financial problems it would cause. People wouldn't buy tickets to women's events, and the money would go down the drain!"

"Hey," said Screech, standing in front of Zack so he could stash the stuffed penguin under the sink. "Looks like another fight."

"You're darn right it's another fight," said Kelly, not bothering to say hello. "This is important stuff. And you guys know it, too. Right, Screech?"

"You bet," Screech answered. "Our miniature golf team needs a new windmill!"

Zack went over to the refrigerator and peered inside, hoping to find something edible. "Ugh," he said after taking a slug of sour milk. "Shouldn't one of you girls go shopping?"

"Zachary Morris!" Kelly turned to him, her blue eyes shooting daggers. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Sexism on campus! Why should a girl do the shopping?"

"Because a guy needs time to work on his car,

hang with his buds, and earn some money," Slater said, coming into the common room.

Alex was right behind him, and just as quick to jump into the fray. "That's not fair, Slater. Look at Kelly. She works at her job just as hard as you do."

Zack held up one hand limply, grabbed a pencil with the other, and pretended to buff his nails. "What, doing some filing?" He laughed. "How does that compare with real man's work?"

Kelly turned bright red. "I can't believe you said that, Zack." She'd been shouting before, but now her voice dropped to a whisper. "You know how seriously I take my job."

Zack gulped. Had he gone too far? "I was just making a joke, Kelly. I wasn't talking about you personally."

"It sounded like you were."

"No—I meant . . . other women!"

Alex strode over. "Like me?"

"Well, yeah," said Zack.

"And me?" said Screech.

"That's it," Kelly put in, before Zack could answer. "You can't worm your way out of this one, Zack. If you're talking about women, you're talking about me. Excuse us, everyone, we have to talk."

Kelly took Zack's arm and pulled him into the girls' room so they could have some privacy. "I'm

not sure we should see each other anymore," she said, her blue eyes a mixture of anger and sadness.

"Kel—be serious! Because of that one comment?" Zack was stunned.

"No, because of your whole attitude toward women. This has been building up for a while. I just don't think you respect me." Kelly's voice was steely, and Zack realized she meant business. "I'm sorry, but that's how I feel. As of right this minute, we're suitemates—nothing more."

Kelly opened the door to leave, and everyone tumbled into the room.

"Doing a little eavesdropping?" Zack said to Alex. "And isn't that just like a woman? You can't mind your own business."

"Hey!" said Alex, pointing at Zack. "Weren't you on an all-out spy campaign just a couple of months ago, when you were chasing after Leslie?"

The insults starting flying.

"Male chauvinist pig!"

"Man hater!"

"Creep!"

"Idiot!"

Thirty minutes later the dust cleared, but it wasn't a pretty sight.

"You can forget about going for a Christmas tree," Slater said, huffing as he turned on his heels. "I wouldn't want to trim anything with you girls!"

"That goes double for me!" said Alex. "And you can just give up those gingerbread cookies you've been hoarding, Slater. I didn't bake them for you. In fact, I'm not even talking to you!"

"And if you guys think I'll be harmonizing with you on Christmas carols, you're sadly mistaken," Screech added for good measure.

It was official. Half the suite wasn't speaking to the other half. All-out war had been declared.

Later, Kelly sank into bed, pulling the comforter over her head. It was only midafternoon. She was still fully dressed. But she didn't care. She wanted to sleep and forget about everything that had happened. How did a simple argument snowball so quickly into disaster? She and Zack: broken up. The suite: torn apart.

And Christmas? Kelly didn't think there'd be much of one at all.

chapter 6

Two days later, early Monday morning, Kelly was sitting at her desk in the health center.

"Let's see," she said, riffling through some papers and putting them in alphabetical order. "Adams, Stanley . . . Benson Thermometers . . . Diamond Medical Supplies . . . Okay, these are set. Now into the circular file." Kelly sighed, dumping the papers into the trash can next to her.

Nurse Tompkins came in just as Kelly was reaching for more papers. "Miss Kapowski! What are you doing now?" she asked briskly.

"I've finished organizing the file cabinets, inputting patient information into the computer, and going through the mail. I was just alphabetizing these papers."

"But those are only going to be thrown out."

"I know."

Nurse Tompkins shook her head. "What happened to your Christmas spirit? You've done all your work, and instead of decorating the bath-

rooms, you're making *more* work for yourself! Are you feeling all right?"

Kelly's eyes widened in surprise. Was Nurse Tompkins actually trying to be nice? "I'm fine. But I guess I lost my holiday cheer," she said miserably. "I thought I'd throw myself into my job instead."

There, that should make Nurse Tompkins happy.

But the nurse just frowned. "That's very commendable, Miss Kapowski. But I don't want any sourpusses around here today. It will spoil things for our very special guest."

"A special guest? Who?"

"Ken Danvers."

"Who?" Kelly repeated blankly.

"Ken Danvers, the football player? The star quarterback? Don't tell me you've never heard of him?" Nurse Tompkins twittered like a schoolgirl.

"No, I haven't. What happened to him?"

Nurse Tompkins patted her hair, looking at her reflection in a shiny metal cabinet. "He was injured at practice a little while ago. I just got a phone call from his trainer on the football field. Most likely it's a sprained ankle. But all the same, we'll be checking Ken into the clinic to look everything over."

Kelly almost smiled. Nurse Tompkins excited over a patient? This Ken Danvers must really be something special.

A few minutes later, when Kelly heard a commotion outside the clinic, she realized she'd been right. Girls were cheering, "Ken, Ken, he's our man!" Guys were shouting, "Womp, there he is!" And the school band was playing a rousing march.

Is this all for one guy? Kelly thought, looking out the window.

She saw Nurse Tompkins rush into the thick of things, and then a crew of doctors and nurses helped Ken inside.

Curious, Kelly peered out from her office door. Ken was in a wheelchair, one leg held out at an awkward angle. His face was twisted with pain. Even so, Kelly could tell he was handsome. With his straight dark hair, black-as-coal eyes, and strong, square chin, he could have been on the cover of a romance novel.

"Out of the way!" Nurse Tompkins hissed as she took personal charge of Ken and the wheelchair. Kelly jumped back, but not before Ken turned in the chair to face her. "Hey," he said faintly and gave her a wink.

Kelly smiled sweetly at him. Sure, Ken was absolutely gorgeous. And sure, having a gorgeous guy pay some attention to her made her feel good. But seeing someone in need also brought Kelly back to her senses.

Ministering to the sick, caring for the injured, doing her part for those less fortunate at Christmastime—that's why she was really working at the health center. For the first time in days, Kelly felt good about herself.

¤ ¤ ¤

"Let's see. There are chocolates, balloons, magazines, get well cards . . ." Kelly was wheeling in another batch of presents for Ken. He'd only been in the clinic a couple of hours, but the gifts were already piling up. "You must be a popular guy."

"Not really," Ken said with a smile. "Everyone loves me just for my throwing arm."

"Well, your arm's still in pretty good shape. It's your ankle you should be worried about."

Just as Nurse Tompkins had predicted, Ken had badly sprained his ankle. A doctor had wrapped it earlier and told Ken to get plenty of bed rest. He'd have to stay in the clinic overnight for observation, too, but there was worse news: It didn't seem likely that Ken Danvers—star quarterback—would be playing in the game on Saturday.

Now, half sitting in bed, Ken idly leafed through a magazine, looking bored and restless.

Kelly felt terrible. She knew from having the chicken pox one Christmas how tough it was to be laid up during the holidays. She remembered how

everyone else had gone out, played games, shopped, and had fun, while all she could do was watch TV and hug her stuffed animals for comfort.

"Can I get you anything else?" she asked Ken.

"I wouldn't mind some company." Ken tossed the magazine on the nightstand next to the bed. "It might help me to stop feeling sorry for myself."

Kelly pulled a chair closer to the bed. "Of course you feel bad. You've just sprained your ankle!"

"I can deal with the pain all right. It's just that I'm not going to be able to play in the big game. That's what's getting to me." He flashed a killer grin at Kelly. "Have you been to any of the games this semester?"

"Just the homecoming one." Kelly racked her brain, trying to remember Ken Danvers on the field. But Leslie's parents were visiting, Zack was acting crazy, and there'd been too many distractions for her to really remember anything.

"That was my best game!"

"Uh, yeah. We won, right?"

"You bet we won!" A sad look crossed Ken's face, and Kelly leaned closer as he whispered, "And now the Falcons will probably lose without me.

"Can I tell you something else?" Ken was still speaking in a soft voice, so Kelly moved to the side

of his bed and listened intently. "I think you're very—"

"Ahem!"

Kelly jumped up, expecting to see Nurse Tompkins at the door. "Slater!" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm visiting Ken." Slater eyed her suspiciously. "I guess I can ask you the same question."

"Me? I work here!" Kelly's voice came out in a squeak, and she wasn't sure why. She wasn't doing anything wrong. She was just tending to a patient.

"She's been my little Florence Nightingale," Ken said with another wink at Kelly.

"Yeah, well, she's someone else's girlfriend," Slater muttered under his breath. Technically that wasn't true, but it still *felt* true.

"What's that?" Ken asked.

"Never mind."

"Well," Kelly said, starting to leave. "Now that you have some company, I'd better get back to the office. Just call if you need anything, Ken."

"I'll call even if I don't need anything," Ken told her, flirting.

Slater scowled. What was going on here?

¤ ¤ ¤

"You should have seen it!" Slater and Zack were in their bedroom. Slater had his psychology text

open, and Zack was making notes in the margin of his anthropology notebook. But instead of studying, Slater was telling Zack about his visit to the clinic, and Zack was just doodling, clutching the pencil tightly while he listened.

"Kelly was sitting on the edge of Danvers's bed, leaning in so close there wasn't an inch of space between them. I tell you, bro, that girl has a thing for the quarterback."

Snap! Zack was pressing so hard, his pencil broke in two. "I can't believe it! I'm all torn up, not even sure it's really over, and she's already running after some guy in a football jersey."

"Wellllll," said Slater, drawing out the word. "He's not just any guy in a football jersey. He's the star quarterback."

"Precisely!" Zack said, slamming his notebook shut. So much for studying. "And Ken Danvers should be the one Kelly's angry at. Not me. She wants to help organize a boycott against football, for gosh sake. And he's a football player—the enemy. I'm just . . . me! Of course, I care about football"—Zack ran a loving finger over his prized autographed ball—"but still!"

He stood up and turned to face Slater, a confused expression on his face. "I just don't get it. Everything was going so great between Kelly and me. I love her, man. I've always loved her. And I

thought this time—at last—we'd be able to work things out."

"So what went wrong?" Slater asked.

A look of sudden understanding crossed Zack's face.

"Jessie Spano! That's what went wrong. She came back into our lives and stirred up all this trouble!"

"Whoa!" Slater sat up straight. "Don't blame Jessie for this. She didn't come here to break you two up, you know."

"What? Mr. Jock of the Year, future all-star for the Fighting Falcons, sticking up for Jessie Spano, Super Feminist?"

Slater slumped back in his seat. He'd better be careful. He didn't want anyone—even Zack—to know about his feelings for Jessie. It would seem as if he were siding with Women Unite.

And I wouldn't do that, Slater thought, flexing a muscle. *I'm a guy's guy.*

"I'm not sticking up for anybody," he told Zack. "But instead of getting on everyone else's case, why don't you talk to Kelly?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, Slater regretted them. In fact, he regretted telling Zack about Ken Danvers in the first place. It's just that when he saw Kelly and Ken together, he saw red—for Zack's sake. And now, after he'd opened his big

mouth, he should've told Zack to cool down; to *not* talk to Kelly until he thought things through. But it was too late.

"Talk to Kelly?" said Zack, practically shouting as he grabbed his coat. "You're right, Slater! I'm outta here!"

chapter 7

I've got to find Kelly, Zack thought, hurrying through the campus quadrangle, kicking pebbles out of his way. *First stop, the Student Health Center. Maybe Kelly's working this shift.*

Running up the steps, Zack had to push his way through a camera crew from a local news show. For a moment, Zack forgot his anger. "What's going on?" he asked the girl next to him. Then he realized it was Susan Jarvis, the love of Screech's life. Even though he and Screech weren't on the best of terms these days, maybe he could do a little maneuvering on his roomie's behalf.

"They're doing a piece on Ken Danvers," Susan told him excitedly. "You know, how he's the star player but won't be able to play in the game?" She looked around at all the people and equipment. "Isn't it amazing?"

Zack shrugged, sensing an opportunity to talk Screech up. "It is if you like this sort of thing. Personally, I feel it's all been done before."

"What do you mean?" Susan sighed dramatically. "Ken Danvers is absolutely dreamy-looking. And a star."

"Big deal," Zack said, pretending to stifle a yawn. "I've seen that story on the sports channel a million times. Star athlete injured. Will he recover? It's nothing. If you really want excitement, you should check out the science lab. I hear they have some incredible experiments going on. There's this one freshman—"

"Ugh," said Susan, interrupting him. "Don't mention the science lab in front of me. Someone gave me this lab rat—with a red bow tied around one of its ugly paws—the other day. It must have been some sort of joke."

"Science isn't a joke," Zack said. But Susan was losing interest in the conversation.

"Isn't that Rock Anders, the reporter?" Susan said, craning her neck. Then she hurried off for a better look, leaving Zack talking to himself.

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A little while later, Zack was back on the warpath, searching for Kelly. She wasn't at the clinic, so he'd gone to the Falcon's Nest and the gym. Then he'd gone back to the suite to make sure Kelly hadn't come home while he was out. No luck. No Kelly anywhere.

"Where else could she be?" Zack asked himself.

Then he noticed a group of students, books clutched in their arms, hurrying down the path.

"I've got back-to-back finals tomorrow," one guy said, "and a term paper due the day after that."

"You think that's bad," the girl walking next to him said. "I've got three finals tomorrow and an oral exam right afterward."

"I just hope we can find seats in the library. The place is packed like a sardine can."

Zack smacked his head. Of course! A sardine can! He hadn't checked the local supermarket. He started to head off campus, but then something else clicked. The library! Zack wasn't all that familiar with the building, but still . . . maybe Kelly was studying.

Trudging up and down the library aisles, Zack gathered his resolve. All that running around had drained him of some of his anger.

"I am an angry young man," he told himself, peering into cubicles. "And I have every right to be! Kelly and a football player? Ha!"

At last, Zack found Kelly in a quiet corner, absorbed in her anthropology textbook. The sight of her sweet face concentrating on her studies was almost too much for Zack to bear. He felt himself melt. But just a little.

"Kelly!" he said, much louder than he had meant to. "We have to talk. Now."

Oops! Zack thought. *That came out sounding a little too much like "me man, you woman, so you better listen to me."*

"That's so typical, Zack." Kelly's voice was icy. "We have to talk now, because *you* want to talk now. Does it look like I'm sitting here twiddling my thumbs, doing nothing? I'm studying."

She glanced at Zack's empty hands. "And if you were smart, you'd be doing the same. This is finals week, if you haven't noticed."

"I've noticed. It's just that I think there are more important things to take care of right now."

Zack was talking about their relationship, but Kelly, misunderstanding, snorted in disgust. "You mean like our war between the sexes? You want to make fun of Women Unite again? Show some more disrespect?"

This wasn't going the way Zack had planned. He was the one who should be mad—he did have a legitimate gripe, after all—and now Kelly had turned the tables.

"No, I'd like to discuss you and me. Or should I say you and Ken Danvers? I heard you were making the moves on him at the clinic." Zack's voice was rising steadily until it turned into a shout. "What's going on between the two of you?"

"Shh!" said Screech, poking his head out from

the next cubicle. "There's nothing going on between Kelly and me. We were just studying, Zack. Honest!"

Zack pushed Screech's head back down, so he couldn't see them over the partition. "Mind your own business, will you, Screech?"

"Leave him alone!" Kelly put in. "If anyone should be minding his own business it's you, Zack Morris. We're not a couple anymore.

"And not that you have any reason to know this," she continued, "but there's nothing going on between Ken and me. He's a patient at the center, and I work there. Making sure he's comfortable is part of my job. Don't you think I'm capable of doing my job without getting sappy over some guy? Oh, no. I forgot—you *don't* think women are capable."

She held up a pencil and pretended to file her nails, imitating Zack. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some filing to do."

"But—"

"Oh, forget it!" Kelly said suddenly, throwing her books in a knapsack. "My concentration's shot. I'm leaving."

Without another word, Kelly stormed out of the library. Zack and Screech exchanged looks.

"Wow!" said Screech. "All this fuss over little ole me? You know my heart belongs to Susan!"

# # #

"Wait!" Zack cried, running through the quad-rangle, trying to catch up with Kelly. "Let me explain."

Explain what? Zack wondered to himself. *That I was acting like a jealous boyfriend when I'm not even Kelly's boyfriend anymore?*

Suddenly, Dean McMann stepped in front of Zack, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Excuse me, Dean," Zack said, trying to go around her.

The dean took a step over so she was once again blocking his path. "Not so fast, young man. I have a few questions for you."

Zack looked at Kelly's retreating figure and sighed. Dean McMann sounded seriously annoyed, and Kelly was already just a blur in the distance.

"I swear, I didn't do it," Zack said.

The dean steered him off the path. "But I haven't accused you of anything. Yet."

"Whatever it is, I didn't do it." Zack tried to look innocent. "Believe me, I've been too wrapped up in my own problems to cause trouble for anyone else."

The dean softened. "Okay, Zack. Maybe I'm jumping the gun. It's just that I saw this flyer." She held out a sheet of paper: BOYCOTT THE LAST FOOTBALL GAME! IT'S FOR A GOOD CAUSE! MORE INFORMATION TO COME! "I thought the good cause might be you."

"What?" said Zack, confused.

"Tell me the truth," the dean continued. "Are you planning to buy up all the unsold tickets because of this supposed boycott and then call the whole thing off so you can sell the tickets at a profit?"

"Hey, that's cool!" Zack looked at her admiringly. "What a great scam! Too bad I didn't think of it."

"You didn't?"

"No, the boycott is legit. It's being promoted by Women Unite; you know, that women's group? And by the way, Dean McMann, may I add that you have a first-rate criminal mind?"

"No, you may not." The dean shook her head. "Well, I guess I owe you an apology, Zack. I'm sorry I jumped to the conclusion that you were behind all this."

"That's okay, Dean." Zack went to thump her on the back as a sign of camaraderie, then thought better of it.

"What else do you know about this organization?" Dean McMann asked.

Not wanting to ruin his newfound friendship with the dean, Zack kept talking as he backed away. If he moved quickly, maybe he could still catch Kelly.

"Not much at all, Dean McMann. I just like to stay informed . . ."

Zack picked up his pace. "I read the papers, keep up on news . . .

"Ouch!" Not watching where he was going, Zack had backed into the campus Christmas tree, placed right in the middle of the quad.

# # #

A few minutes later, Zack walked into the suite, pulling the last pine needle out of the seat of his pants. Alex and Leslie were studying in the common room, their backs to each other.

"Has anyone seen Kelly?" Zack asked.

"I would answer," Alex said, her face still buried in her book, "but I'm not talking to you, Zack. And I would ask Leslie to relay my answer to you, but I'm not speaking to her, either."

"Excuse me," Leslie said coldly. "But if you're not speaking to anyone, who are you talking to now?"

"Not to someone who would turn against her own sex!"

"Humph!" said Leslie. "You're not even trying to see my side of things, Alex."

Alex kept reading, ignoring her roommate.

"Leslie!" Zack said. "Do you know where Kelly is?"

"Sure," said Leslie, going back to her book. "She's in our room. Why do you think I'm out here?"

Zack rolled his eyes. All this in-suite fighting was

really getting to him. But first things first. And first on his mind was Kelly and his love life.

He went to the girls' bedroom door and raised his fist to knock.

He stopped short. There was a DO NOT DISTURB sign staring him in the face. Making sure Alex and Leslie weren't watching, Zack peered in through the keyhole.

Inside, Kelly was reading her anthro textbook, cuddling a stuffed penguin in her arms.

She likes it! Zack thought. *She likes my Secret Santa gift.* Excited, he went to open the door. It was locked.

Zack opened his mouth to call Kelly's name, but then he remembered: Kelly liked the gift—but she didn't know who had given it to her. He glanced again at the DO NOT DISTURB sign. Clearly, barging right in wouldn't help his case.

I'll just bide my time, he decided. *What's the rush? I know exactly how to get to Kelly now.* Zack smiled broadly. *With my Secret Santa gifts!*

chapter 8

Screech stood in front of the dorm mailbox-
es, posing like a statue, with one hand reaching for
his mail. He'd been like that for an hour now, and
he was beginning to tire. But Screech was waiting
for Susan to check her mail so he could "casually"
bump into her while retrieving his own. He didn't
want to quit now. Screech had done his research
and usually around this time, 5:00 P.M., Susan had
already come and gone.

Just my luck, he thought. *Susan will skip today
and I'll be stuck like this until tomorrow at five
o'clock.*

But, he decided, it would be worth the wait
Screech had slipped another Secret Santa gift into
Susan's mailbox, and he wanted to see her face
when she opened it.

Finally, he heard the *clack, clack, clack* of heels
and the sound of Susan's voice. "Come on, Carla
How can you really be interested in those science
fiction movies? They're just so boring!"

Pulling his arm out of the mailbox and trying to sound relaxed, Screech said, "Well, hello, girls."

Susan looked at him oddly, and Screech realized he was standing with his arm held out, as if he were still reaching for his mail.

"Guess I'm a little stiff," he said, massaging his minuscule biceps. "You know, all that working out."

"Yeah, right," said Susan, turning back to her mailbox.

Carla blushed slightly and didn't say a word.

"Garbage . . . garbage . . . junk," said Susan, flipping through her letters. She was just about to toss the lot of them when Carla spoke up.

"Wait! What's that?" She pulled out a flyer.

> Women Unite—and men, too. Protest unfair athletic funding. Boycott the last football game. Meeting Tuesday at 4:00 P.M. For information call Jessie Spano at 555-4573.

"Like I said, garbage," Susan said. "But what's this?" She had spied something else in the mailbox and was pulling out a manila envelope. "It's from my Secret Santa!"

Screech gulped. His gift! Wanting a closer vantage point, he ambled over like it was the most natural thing in the world. Quick! He needed some kind of discussion topic!

"You shouldn't be so quick to throw out that

flier," he told Susan. "Historically, boycotts have been an important means of change. There was the grape boycott to call attention to the plight of migrant farm workers, and there was the boycott of appliances made by a factory that only employed underage workers . . ."

"And remember the lettuce boycott?" Carla was speaking so softly, Screech didn't hear her.

"Hey!" said Susan, not listening to either one of them as she opened the envelope. "My Secret Santa sent me an X ray!" She looked at it more closely.

"Yuck! It's a skull!" she shrieked, dropping it on the floor.

"Well, do you like it?" Screech asked anxiously. It was important that Susan appreciate this gift—after all, it was his skull. Screech had gotten it when he was in the hospital having his tonsils removed. Somehow, he'd convinced the doctor that his head should be examined, too. And as Screech recalled, it hadn't taken much convincing.

Still, the time wasn't right to reveal all that to Susan. This Secret Santa business was supposed to be a hush-hush operation. Besides, Screech figured he could tell her all about it while they were slow dancing at the formal Christmas dinner.

"Why would I like something like that?" Susan said, interrupting his thoughts and giving the X ray

kick. "Hey, there's Dawn. Come on, Carla, we've got to go."

Susan walked off. Feeling depressed, Screech sat down right on the floor.

"What's going on, buddy?" Slater was coming over to check his mail. "Life got you down?"

"Susan has me down," Screech explained grimly. "She didn't like my Secret Santa gift."

"Oh, yeah? What was it?"

"I'll show you." Screech leaned over to pick up the X ray, but it wasn't there.

"That's strange. It disappeared."

"Well, whatever it was, Screech, I'm sure it was unique."

Slater opened his box and pulled out a boycott flyer. It was marked "Personal," and Slater quickly shoved it into his pocket. Had Screech noticed? No, he was too upset about Susan to even look up.

Making sure no one was watching, Slater pulled out the flyer, then quickly read it. In one corner of the notice, Jessie had scribbled a message: "Can you meet me by the fountain in front of the library at midnight?—J."

A secret midnight rendezvous. Slater sighed. True, he and Jessie had agreed to keep their budding relationship under wraps. If it got out that they were dating, it would be bad news: A jock and a

feminist involved when she was organizing a football boycott and he was trying out for the team? It wouldn't look good for either one of them, and they knew it.

Slater and Jessie had even talked to everyone in the suite, telling them that nothing was going on between them. Even though there'd been one flash of old-time magic, Slater and Jessie had explained, they were just too different for anything to work out.

"So we're keeping it secret," Slater said to himself, "but a midnight meeting?" Why did every woman he was interested in have such a taste for drama?

Mixing the flier in with his other mail, Slater thought back to his date with Jessie the other night. They'd decided to compromise by going to a macrobiotic vegetarian restaurant for dinner. That had been Jessie's choice, and Slater had to down the food with glass after glass of natural spring water. But later, they'd gone to the auto show, and Jessie had actually let him pay. Slater shrugged. Of course, it hadn't meant that much. Jessie had already sprung for dinner.

Just then Slater heard a loud roar coming from outside.

"What's that?" Screech said, jumping up.

"I don't know. But it sounds pretty major."

Slater and Screech rushed outside and joined the growing crowd. The roar was getting louder.

Around the bend, Kelly, Jessie, and Alex marched into view. Alex was pounding on a drum with one hand, shaking a tambourine with the other, and blowing a whistle all at the same time. Jessie was carrying a sign that said WOMEN UNITE! and handing out pamphlets to anyone who would take one.

"Hey, nobody told me about this!" Screech said. "It's a protest march!"

Kelly, seeing a crowd gather, held her cheerleading pom-poms high above her head and started to chant, "Hey, hey, make them pay. Equal funding, equal say."

Some girls in the crowd joined in the cheer, and Kelly grinned at Jessie. "See," she whispered. "You thought cheerleading was a bad idea. But it's paving the way for *all* women to unite—and we're getting people revved up, too. The meeting is going to be packed!"

Jessie grinned back. Then she spied Slater in the crowd. Lifting up a hand filled with pamphlets, she waved. Slater smiled and started to salute just as Ken and a couple of football players passed by. Quickly, Slater turned the salute into a stretch, muttering, "Oh, my aching back. Lifted too many weights this morning."

"If you want some real exercise, you should try keeping your arm in a mailbox for an hour," Screech advised. "Or maybe you should try some marching." With that, Screech jumped in with the protesters, punching the air with his fist as he cried, "Hey, hey!"

¤ ¤ ¤

The next morning, Kelly woke early and headed to the health center to work the first shift. She had arranged to have phone duty from eight to eleven o'clock, hoping she'd have time to study for her anthropology final between calls.

It turned out to be a slow morning at the clinic, and Kelly was able to read three chapters. She was just highlighting a passage on native South American tribes led by women—a special section of the course—when Ken Danvers stuck his head in the office.

"Just here getting a new pair of crutches," he told Kelly, supporting himself on his good leg and waving one crutch in the air.

Ken was wearing his football jersey, "32," and Kelly felt vaguely guilty talking to him.

"I thought they fitted you with those the other day." She was trying to sound businesslike, even though it was obvious she wasn't working, just studying.

"All right. You caught me. What would you say if I told you I came here to see you?"

Luckily, the phone rang, and Kelly didn't have to respond. "Student Health Center," she said, answering the call. She paused a moment, listening. "Hold on and I'll connect you."

"Actually, I came by to tell you I saw the march yesterday," Ken said when she hung up.

Kelly turned to face him, her blue eyes blazing. So that was it! He'd come to start an argument—just as Zack did in the library.

"Well?" she said, a challenge in her voice. "What did you think?"

Ken hobbled closer. "I was very impressed."

"You were?"

"Uh-huh. It really started me thinking, you know, about funding for sports and stuff like that."

"It did?" Kelly couldn't believe it.

"Sure." Ken came closer. "Do you mind if I sit down? My ankle is beginning to throb."

"Of course." Kelly started to stand, but Ken gently pushed her back down. "I'll just share, if you don't mind." He perched on the arm of the chair and looked down at Kelly through his long, dark lashes.

The phone rang again. "Student Health Center." Kelly listened carefully.

"Yes," a muffled voice was saying. "I need help. I feel just terrible. I'm suffering."

Kelly was quick to react. "Where are you? Is this an emergency? We can send an ambulance right over!"

"I don't need an ambulance," the voice said, beginning to sound more familiar. "I only need my girlfriend back. I'm suffering from a broken heart."

Zack! Kelly sucked in her breath. Leave it to scamming, anything-for-a-laugh Zack Morris to do something like this.

"I'm working, Zack," Kelly said in as even a tone as she could muster. "I know you think my job isn't important, but I really don't have time for this." She hung up and turned back to Ken.

"You were saying?" she said sweetly.

"I realized it's just not fair to girl—I mean women—athletes," Ken continued. "I'm on the injured list, so I won't be able to play on Saturday. But even if I could, I wouldn't. I love football. But I have my priorities straight. I would still join your boycott, Kelly."

"You would?" *Why am I speaking to him in two-word sentences?* Kelly thought. *Maybe I'm just in a state of shock. Ken is being so sensitive, and I'm not used to seeing that side of a guy.*

For a moment, Kelly considered Zack. Would he give up something he loved for a cause she believed

in? For her? Judging by his recent actions, Kelly doubted it.

"I've really got to hand it to you gir—women . . ." Ken was saying. "You're fighting for something real. Something important. Not just gaining yardage on the football field. You make me feel as if I've been wasting my time. And I want to help."

"Oh, Ken," said Kelly softly.

Ken brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes, and Kelly's heart beat a little faster. Zack was wrong. She hadn't been interested in Ken Danvers, star quarterback. Until now.

chapter 9

"What do you think? Should we start? Or should we wait to see if more people are coming?" Jessie was talking to Donna Klein, the head of the Women Unite chapter.

"You're running the meeting, Jessie. This boycott is your baby." Donna smiled. "But since you asked . . ."

"What?" said Jessie, looking around the empty meeting room. Only a few students were milling around, drinking coffee and munching on donuts. "I need all the help I can get."

"I think you might as well begin. All things considered, this isn't a *terrible* turnout. It's finals week. People are studying and making their Christmas plans." Donna patted Jessie's back. "I know you wanted this boycott to be big, but sometimes you just have to start small."

"I know. I just didn't realize how small," Jessie said with a forced laugh. She stepped up to the front of the room and clapped her hands.

"All right! Would everyone please take a seat so we can begin?"

Kelly finished her coffee. "Come on, Alex."

"Yeah," said Alex, gazing at the dozens of chairs set up around the room. "We'd better hurry up if we want good seats." She snorted at her own joke, then she caught herself. "I really thought more people would show after our protest march. Poor Jessie. There's hardly anyone here. If this were my opening night, I'd be ready to call it quits."

"Shh." Kelly gave Jessie a thumbs-up sign as she pushed Alex into a seat. "For Jessie's sake, let's pretend this is really going well."

The meeting room, already on the quiet side, suddenly became deathly still.

"Okay," said Jessie from the front of the room. "You know why we're here: to organize a football boycott."

She paused, waiting for some kind of response.

"Yeah!" Alex shouted feebly.

Jessie floundered. Then, gamely, she tried to put some enthusiasm into her speech.

"Are you with me?"

Again, Alex shouted a weak, "Yeah," and Kelly added a tentative, "Sure we are, Jess."

Jessie surveyed the nearly empty room. This wasn't going well at all. In fact, it was downright

lousy. Maybe she should try to involve the audience one-on-one.

"Let's get to know one another first," Jessie said less loudly. "Who wants to tell why they've come to this meeting?"

Nobody spoke up. Someone in the third row got up and left.

Finals . . . Christmas . . . maybe this isn't the best time for a boycott, Jessie thought. *Maybe I should just call the whole thing off.*

"I've been thinking," Jessie began, "Maybe—"

Just then the door banged open, and Ken Danvers hopped into the room, his crutches hitting the floor with every step.

"Is this where Women Unite is meeting?"

A collective gasp went through the room as people recognized the star quarterback. Everybody sat up straight and looked interested.

Quickly, Kelly ran up to Jessie and explained who he was.

"Oh!" said Jessie, realizing what this could mean for the cause. "Please come in."

Ken flashed a smile at Kelly as he took a seat in the front row. "Have I missed anything?"

"No," Jessie said, sounding more determined by the minute. "I was just about to start. Now, here's what I think we should do about the boycott. . . ."

# # #

Two hours later, Jessie had wrapped up the meeting, and she and Kelly were cleaning up.

"Thanks for staying, Kel," Jessie said, putting away the unused plates. "I really appreciate the help."

"Oh, it's nothing," said Kelly as she rinsed out the coffee mugs. "I thought the meeting was terrific."

"I'll tell you what was terrific," Jessie said. "Ken Danvers showing up."

Kelly sighed. Thinking about Ken, she let the water overflow from the mugs and spill onto the floor.

"Sorry." She scrambled to her knees to wipe up the mess.

Jessie grinned. "A little flustered, are we, Kelly? It looks like someone is interested in our new recruit."

"I just can't believe he actually showed. I mean, he was talking as if he would at the clinic this morning. But still."

"I know," said Jessie. "It is unbelievable. A football player joining the boycott could really turn things around for us. Our protest would finally get some attention. Even if we don't get tons of people at the boycott, I bet everyone will really take notice. After all, we have the star quarterback supporting us! We'll be big news!"

"Jessie," Kelly interrupted. She had other things on her mind besides the boycott. "I think I'm beginning to like—I mean really like—Ken."

"I'm glad," said somebody at the door. Kelly whirled around. It was Ken.

"I forgot my hat," he explained, going into the meeting room to retrieve a baseball cap that had fallen behind a chair. He smiled at Kelly. "For once, my forgetfulness paid off. Now I know how you feel."

"Uh, I have to . . . to make a phone call," Jessie said, wanting to leave them alone.

"No, don't leave on my account," Ken said. "I have to go, anyway. You know, hit the books for finals." He turned to Kelly. "But is it okay if I call you?"

"Sure," Kelly said quietly, gazing down at the ground. When she looked up at Ken, her heart fluttered as if it had wings. "I'd like that."

Ken thanked Jessie, said his good-byes, and a minute later the girls were alone again.

Kelly sank into a chair. "Wow!"

"Wow is right. It looks like you two will be an item for the formal Christmas dinner at your dorm." Jessie paused for a second. "But what about Zack?" she asked quietly.

Kelly sighed. "I'm not sure, Jess. I thought we were on the right track, but I can't be in a relationship with someone who treats me like an inferior person just because I'm a woman."

Jessie nodded understandingly. Then she eyed her watch. It was almost time to meet Slater. She looked apologetically at Kelly. "I hate to clean and run, but I've got to go."

"It's after eleven," Kelly said. "Where are you rushing off to?"

Jessie thought for a moment. Should she tell Kelly about Slater? No, she decided, it wouldn't be fair. She and Slater had talked it over earlier, and both had agreed: Their relationship would be kept secret till after the boycott. Jessie couldn't go back on her word.

"Did I say I've got to get going? What I meant was, *you've* got to get going. You have your anthro final tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Kelly, standing up. "You're right. I'm in pretty good shape, but I should read through my notes one more time."

Kelly moved to the door, smiling dreamily. "Or maybe I'll just think about Ken!"

# # #

Zack couldn't concentrate on his anthropology textbook. The words were swimming in front of his eyes, rearranging themselves to read, "You blew it, buster." Slamming the book shut, Zack turned to Slater.

"How can you study at a time like this?" he asked.

"Easy. It's finals week. What better time to study?" Slater had been at the books all night long. He just had one more test to go and felt pretty confident about the ones he'd already taken.

"I lucked out with English lit and psych," Zack was saying. "I was studying for those finals before this boycott mess started. But I'm having a tough time with this anthropology stuff. Maybe it's because Kelly's in the class."

"Don't sweat it, bud," Slater said sympathetically. "Tell you what, why don't I leave you alone so you can study in peace?"

"Leave now?" said Zack. "It's almost midnight."

Slater grinned. "Exactly."

# # #

Midnight. Jessie was stamping her feet, trying to keep warm in the brisk night air. Where was Slater? They were supposed to meet here, by the fountain, at twelve. Had something gone wrong?

Just then Jessie heard Slater's voice. "What am I doing out here so late?" he was saying loudly. "Nothing. Not a thing. Just taking a walk. It's not as if I'm meeting somebody or anything."

Three sets of footsteps were coming closer. Quickly, Jessie ducked behind the fountain.

"I guess not everyone makes dates for midnight," said one of Slater's companions, a guy.

A soft, girlish giggle followed that statement. "Oh, Ken. Only you would think of something so romantic."

Ken? Jessie thought. She peered out from her hiding spot. And there was Ken Danvers, his arm draped casually around some girl's shoulders.

"Oh!" said Jessie. She clamped a hand over her mouth, hoping no one had heard her exclamation.

"Did you hear something?" said the girl.

"Not a thing," said Slater. "But there could be some sort of animal nearby. A lot of nocturnal animals camp out around this fountain."

"Ken!" The girl sounded frightened. "Is that true?"

"Don't worry, I'll protect you," Ken said in a patronizing way.

"Of course you would," Slater put in. "But it's really not safe here late at night. No matter who's doing the protecting."

"It isn't?" Now Ken seemed nervous. "Why don't we stroll over by the quadrangle, Angie?" He steered the girl away from the fountain and down the path. "See you later, Slater."

"Yeah, bye," Slater muttered. Then in a whisper, he hissed, "Jessie? Are you here?"

"I'm here," Jessie said in her normal voice, straightening up.

"That was a close call." Slater leaned over and gave her a kiss. "And speaking of close . . ." He moved in for another kiss.

Jessie melted against his broad chest. It felt so right being close to Slater, as if she had finally come home. Slater ran a hand down her back, and a tingle raced through Jessie all the way to her toes.

"Glad I got rid of Danvers?" Slater asked softly.

"Uh-huh," said Jessie, snuggling closer for another kiss. Suddenly, she pulled away. Danvers!

"That creep!" Jessie spit out. "He was coming on to Kelly like gangbusters just before, and it turns out he has a girlfriend!"

"What? Danvers doesn't have a girlfriend."

"Then who was that girl?"

"You didn't let me finish, Jess. Danvers doesn't have *a* girlfriend, he has about a dozen of them. I admire him."

"Slater!" Jessie said, horrified.

"Come on, Jess. Please let me finish. The guy's a great quarterback—that's why I admire him. But when it comes to women, he's a first-class slime."

Jessie angrily kicked a pebble. "He was all sweetness and light to Kelly at the Women Unite meeting. I thought he really liked her."

"I knew Kelly was going to get in trouble with

that guy one way or the other," Slater said, clenching his fists. "I should have told you earlier, but I thought I did enough damage talking to Zack. I wouldn't trust that guy as far as I could throw him.

"Hmm," Slater added, thoughtfully, checking out his muscular arms. "I wonder how far I *could* throw him."

"Slater!" Jessie shook him in frustration. "Do you realize what this means? Not only is Kelly going to get hurt, but everything Ken Danvers said about standing behind the boycott and supporting Women Unite was a load of hogwash. He just wants to get to Kelly!"

"Hey, take it easy." Slater extricated himself from Jessie's hold. "You want me in good working condition, don't you? Ken Danvers isn't the only one looking to make the moves on a pretty girl."

"What?" said Jessie, distracted.

"I thought we'd go back to the Women Unite headquarters, hang out, maybe make some popcorn . . ."

"I'm really worried about the boycott," Jessie said, still not listening. "I was thinking about canceling it before we had the meeting. Then Ken showed up, and it looked like the boycott could work. But now . . ."

Slater perked up. "Does this mean you're giving it up?"

Jessie's face took on the grim, determined look Slater knew all too well.

"No way!" Jessie's voice rang out in the empty courtyard. "If anything, this is a sign that we should keep at it. We have to stand up—unite—against slimeballs like Ken. He's a big part of the problem, Slater. Guys like him are bad news. They just use women, not giving a thought to our well-being or what we really want. And what we want"—Jessie took a deep breath—"is to continue the boycott."

"Well, that seems kind of s—" Slater was about to say "stupid," but he took another look at Jessie's face—"s-smart. I've got to hand it to you, Jessie. You really mean business."

Slater shrugged. He meant what he said. This discussion might have sparked a fight back in the old days. But now there was something about Jessie's conviction that impressed him.

Respect, Slater thought. *I respect Jessie's views, and I admire her courage.*

In fact, instead of being angry, Slater was more attracted to Jessie than ever.

"Uh, Jess," he said, pulling her close. "About that popcorn . . ."

"Not now, Slater." Jessie gave him a quick peck and turned to leave. "I've got to warn Kelly!"

chapter 10

"Where's Leslie?" Kelly asked. She and Alex were in their bedroom, sipping hot chocolate and settling in for some girl talk before they went to sleep.

"She's studying, pulling an all-nighter in the lounge."

"That's good," Kelly said, leaning back against her pillow with a dreamy smile. "Peace and quiet . . . ahh, I love it." She wiggled her toes happily. "I'm tired of arguing about this football stuff with Leslie and the guys. I just want to think about Ken. I want to remember every word he said to me and hold on to this feeling for a while."

Alex grinned ruefully, thinking back to how she had felt about Slater in the beginning. "I can almost remember that feeling," she said. "It's like you're walking on air."

"You know, Alex," Kelly continued, leaning forward to show how serious she was. "I'm really falling for Ken. He's so different from Zack, and

from most other guys, too. He'd be such a caring boyfriend. Someone I could really talk to, open up to, and share everything with."

Alex pretended to swoon. "How lucky can you get?"

Just then Jessie burst into the room. "Kelly! I've got to tell you something! It's about Ken!"

"Oh, hi, Jess," Kelly said, snuggling with her stuffed penguin. "I was just talking to Alex about him." She smiled at Jessie. "Did he come back to the Women Unite office to look for me?"

"Not exactly." Jessie took a deep breath. This wasn't going to be easy. She'd have to be diplomatic . . . tactful . . . say it the nicest way possible.

"Ken's a sleaze!"

Jessie sighed. That wasn't exactly tactful. But she couldn't help it. The guy was a jerk, and she wanted Kelly to know it.

Kelly sat up, a look of alarm in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"He has a string of girls a mile long. He'll just use you and toss you out, like . . ." Jessie couldn't think of an example and just trailed off.

"How do you know?" Kelly asked.

"How do I know?" Jessie repeated, stalling. She couldn't say that Slater had told her. That would mean she'd just seen him, told him personal things,

maybe even had something going on with him. It would give too much away.

"Uh, I was taking a walk just now and saw him with another girl."

"Well, they were probably getting together to study."

"They didn't look like they were studying," Jessie said.

Kelly gave her a defiant stare. "I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation. I'm not going to fly off the handle. Maybe things didn't work out between you and Slater because of this football thing, Jess, but that doesn't mean it gets in the way of every relationship," she added pointedly.

What could Jessie say? She tapped her toe, frustrated by the whole situation.

Suddenly, the door swung open, and Leslie staggered in, carrying an armful of books. "Hello, everyone," she said. "Boy, am I bushed. I feel like I've been studying for half my life."

Leslie looked around anxiously, hoping someone would answer.

"I should get going," Jessie said, directing her comment to Kelly. "I just stopped by for a minute."

"Well, don't let me keep you," Kelly said icily. Then she softened. "And, Jessie, thank you. Really. I know you were only looking out for me."

"What's going on?" Leslie whispered to Alex. Alex buried her head in her book, deliberately not answering.

When Jessie left, Leslie turned to Kelly, ready to give another stab at burying the hatchet. "Do you want to order some pizza? I've got a lot of studying to do, and the carbos would really help."

Leslie was tired, but she was also tired of feeling like an unwanted houseguest in her own room. She wanted things to go back to normal, and she was hoping if she acted as if nothing had changed . . .

"I'm going to sleep," Kelly said shortly, turning her back on Leslie.

So much for that, Leslie thought, disappointed. But she really was hungry, so she went into the common room where Zack was studying.

"Want to order some pizza?" she asked.

"Sure," Zack said, pushing back his chair. "Anchovies?"

"Great," said Leslie. "I love 'em."

Kelly jumped out of bed and slammed the door shut. She didn't want to hear any more. "I hate anchovies," she muttered. "Maybe those two should just get together and eat pizza until they both feel sick."

"Kelly!" Alex sounded surprised. "That's not like you." She smiled. "It's more like me."

"Yeah, well, I guess it hurts to see Leslie and

Zack so buddy-buddy again. Not that I want to get back together with him," she said quickly.

"I know," said Alex. "You just don't want to see him with anyone else."

Kelly forced herself to laugh, but it was an empty attempt. Trying to find some comfort, she slipped on her comfy flannel robe.

"Hey, what's this?" she said, pulling out a pair of furry booties from one pocket. "Oh, how darling—and there's a note: 'Here's a little something to keep your toes toasty. Love, Your Secret Santa.'"

"They match your robe," Alex noted, looking over.

"I know. They really are the perfect gift." Kelly thought for a moment, considering. "They must be from someone who knows me really well. I bet it's Screech."

She hurried through the common room—ignoring Zack and Leslie, and Slater, who had just come in—and went straight into the guys' room.

"Hi, Screech."

"Hi, Kel. You're just in time." Screech held out a package. "I was just about to open my first Secret Santa gift."

"Wow, something from Burton's. That's the most expensive store in town," Kelly said, watching Screech tear off the wrapping paper.

Screech gave her a look. "Kelly, I'm surprised at

you. We both know it's the thought that counts, not the actual—ugh!" Screech had opened the box and was staring openmouthed at the gift inside.

"What's the matter?" Kelly reached inside the tissue paper and pulled out a yellow tie. "Hey, this is terrific. And very preppie."

"I guess I can give it to Zack," Screech said, taking the tie from Kelly and holding it disdainfully with his fingertips. "But I could never wear it. It just doesn't fit my image at all."

"You're right. Obviously, your Secret Santa doesn't know you very well, Screech. Sometimes it takes a real friend to know just the right gift to give. Do you know what I'm saying?" Kelly asked carefully, trying to feel him out about her gifts.

Screech nodded, thinking of the great presents he'd given Susan.

"My Secret Santa gave me these terrific booties." Kelly slipped them on, showing them off to Screech. "What do you think?"

"I think your toes are going to be toasty all winter."

Toasty toes? That's just what the note said! Kelly couldn't hold herself back any longer. "Screech, are you my Secret Santa?"

Screech took a step back. "Kelly Kapowski, I'm shocked that you could ask a question like that. Christmas is all about surprises. And you want me to

give away a surprise like Secret Santa? Nobody should tell who their person is. You can get away with giving a clue now and then. Just a clue. But you want me to crack like an egg salad sandwich . . . spill the baked beans . . . open up like a jar of peanut butter . . . and you know what, Kelly? I'm feeling kind of hungry. Care to join me in a"—Screech checked his watch—"one o'clock snack?"

"No, thanks," said Kelly, flopping back on his bed. "I'll just wait here for you to get back."

Screech narrowed his eyes. Did Kelly want the room to herself so she could snoop around looking for Secret Santa clues?

"Well, make yourself at home," he said. "Just remember, this is Zack's home, too. And he could walk in any minute."

Still, Kelly didn't budge.

Kelly watched Screech leave, then idly leafed through some papers on his desk.

"Ah-ha!" Screech said, leaping back into the room.

"Ah-ha, what?" Kelly dropped the papers back onto the desk. "Sheesh! I was just looking over your bio notes. You do remember we're in the same class, don't you?"

"Of course," Screech said sheepishly. "I meant, ah-ha—I have peanut butter, jelly, and two slices of bread right in my desk drawer."

"You do?"

Screech nodded as he took out everything he needed to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "You never know when you'll need a little sustenance. Bite?" Screech held out his sloppy sandwich, and Kelly shook her head.

"I guess I'd better get to sleep, anyway."

"Well, good-night," Screech said, waving the sandwich so globs of jam flew around the room.

"'Night," said Kelly, heading for the door. Screech made sure Kelly had really gone. Then he dropped the sandwich in the garbage. Lifting up his bio notes, he said, "We wouldn't want Kelly finding you, would we my little Secret Santa gift?"

From under the sheets of paper, Screech pulled out a rock. A moon rock to be exact: a memento from a trip to the space museum. It was a souvenir he'd always treasured. Attached to the rock was a note: "Susan, I think you're out of this world. Love, Your Secret Santa, Screech."

"Oops!" said Screech, realizing he'd written his name. Quickly, he crossed it out. "If I left that in, Susan might have figured it all out!"

# # #

Chewing on his slice of pizza, Zack watched Kelly scurry back into her room. He sighed. Clearly, she liked the stuffed penguin. Every time Zack

snuck a look through Kelly's keyhole, she was snuggling it. And he'd just heard her say how much she liked the booties, too.

But why did Kelly think Screech was her Secret Santa? Why didn't she realize *he* was giving her the gifts? They were personal, thoughtful items; they should be screaming out "Zack Morris bought me just for you!" Maybe it was time to up the ante, to get Kelly gifts that would really make her think.

"Zack," said Leslie, interrupting his thoughts. "What time is your final tomorrow?"

"I'm not sure," Zack muttered. "Sometime in the morning, I think."

"Well, don't you think you ought to find out, preppie?" Slater reached over to nudge the anthropology book closer to Zack. "And look, you've barely cracked the binding on this thing."

Zack eyed the textbook. "Okay, okay. Just leave me alone. I'll get my studying done, I promise."

"Well, no more studying for me," Leslie said, gathering up some plates and napkins. "That pizza isn't going to keep me awake. It's sitting in my stomach like a log, putting me to sleep. And maybe I'm better off getting a good night's rest, anyway."

"How about you?" Slater asked Zack.

Zack glanced in the girls' bedroom as Leslie went inside. For a moment, he could see Kelly brush-

ing her long hair in front of the mirror. A wave of sorrow swept over him. Not only had he lost his girlfriend, he'd lost his best friend, too.

"As I said," Zack said, turning back to Slater. "I'm going to get some studying done." He opened up a notebook and started to write furiously.

Slater grinned. "Wise choice, son," he joked. "You won't regret it."

"You bet I won't," Zack said to himself, scribbling away. At the top of the page he wrote, "New Secret Santa gifts to get Kelly. Item #1 . . ."

Anthropology could wait.

chapter 11

It was Wednesday night at the Falcon's Nest, and the restaurant was deserted. *Everybody must be studying,* Slater decided, looking the place over with a professional eye. A few people spotted the tables, but business was definitely down.

Good thing I have Jessie to keep me occupied, Slater thought. Jessie was going around the room, tacking up boycott posters, and Slater was walking in her wake, quietly pulling them down.

"Yes," he said, gazing at her appreciatively from behind. "You're still one hot momma."

Jessie spun around. "Slater!" Then she noticed he was holding a bunch of boycott posters. "You've been taking them all down?"

"A jock's got to do what a jock's got to do." He grinned at Jessie, and Jessie couldn't help it—she had to smile back.

"Come on, Slater," she said, her hand outstretched. "Give them up."

Still smiling, Slater gave her the posters. Then he joined Zack, who was sitting at a nearby table munching on a cheeseburger and some fries.

"Guess a feminist's got to do what a feminist's got to do," he told Zack.

Jessie flung her hair back as she started to rehang the posters, and Slater gave a long, low whistle. "And boy, is that some feminist!"

Zack gazed at him suspiciously. Slater and Jessie were definitely flirting with each other. Was something going on? Shrugging, Zack went back to his cheeseburger. Slater would confide in him if that were the case.

"How was your anthropology final?" Slater asked, grabbing one of the fries and flipping it into his mouth. "It was today, right?"

"Yeah." Zack shrugged again. "I'd tell you I aced it, but I'd be lying."

"That bad?" Slater said sympathetically.

"That bad."

They both fell silent for a minute, and Zack realized Susan and her suitemates were sitting a few tables away. The room was so empty, he could hear every word they were saying.

Zack put his finger on his lips to silence Slater and motioned toward their table. "Let's listen," he mouthed, "for Screech." Slater nodded, understanding.

"So I get back from working out," Susan was saying, "and I try to open the door to the suite. But there's this weird rock thing wedged into the hinge. There's no way that door's going to open. So I call the maintenance guy. It takes him like an hour to show up; meanwhile, I have all this studying to do, I have to go to the bathroom—but I can't go anywhere. I have to wait. Finally, the maintenance guy shows up. He takes the door off the hinge, hands me this rock"—Susan held out Screech's moon rock—"then reattaches the door. The whole thing took forever."

Carla, sitting next to her, picked up the rock and examined it closely. "It's a moon rock!" she exclaimed. "You have a piece of outer space right in front of you!"

"Big deal!" Susan tossed the rock into an empty dish. "It's just another stupid Secret Santa present." She turned to Dawn. "What have you gotten?"

"I'm wearing it," Dawn said, showing off a ceramic cat pin.

"Oooh!" Susan squealed. "I've seen them in all the hip stores. How precious."

At the table a few feet away, Slater snorted. "Yeah, that cat's terrific—if you like mass-produced jewelry. What's wrong with that girl? Doesn't she realize how much time and effort Screech puts into his gifts?"

"I guess not. Hey," Zack added with a puzzled expression, "I've just realized something!"

"What's that?" said Slater, standing up. "But this better not be a long-winded moment of truth for you, Zack. I've got to get back to work."

"No, it's nothing earth-shattering. It's just that I haven't gotten one Secret Santa gift. I've been so caught up in getting Kelly just the right presents . . ."—he cast a rueful glance at his books on the next seat over—"and *not* studying, that I haven't given one thought to *my* presents."

"That's the spirit! After all, it's better to give than to receive." Slater pulled an order pad out of his back pocket. "And speaking of giving, I'd better clear Susan's table now that they've left. You know, while I'm at it, I'll just grab Screech's moon rock out of that dirty dish. At the very least, the poor guy should get it back."

Zack nodded absentmindedly, his mind back on Kelly and what he could give her next.

Slater went over to Susan's table and picked up the dish. It was empty. Looking for the rock, Slater lifted dish after dish and tossed out all the garbage. But he didn't find it.

The moon rock was gone.

# # #

The next afternoon, Kelly was hurrying across the quad on her way to a Women Unite meeting.

Finished with all her tests, Kelly was practically skipping down the path, happy that her first set of finals was history.

"And," Kelly said to herself, "I have a date with Ken tonight! What a way to celebrate!"

All of a sudden, Kelly slowed her steps to a walk. A date? With someone other than Zack? It sounded fine in theory, but in practice it felt a little strange.

"You don't have to feel bad," she told herself as she left campus. "You don't owe Zack anything. Except for a Secret Santa gift or two."

It was a difficult situation. How could she not give her Secret Santa person gifts? But how could she shower Zack with presents? She wasn't even speaking to him! Zack was getting exactly what he deserved. Nothing. Still, Kelly felt bad about the whole thing.

Her mind turned to Ken, and immediately Kelly felt better. Ken had been calling her every day, asking about her finals, her work at the center, how she felt about things. No matter what Jessie had said about his womanizing, Kelly couldn't believe it. If only Jessie could see what he was really like.

The Women Unite office came into view, and Kelly stopped, hands on hips, bracing herself for a possible confrontation with Jessie.

"I'll just come right out and tell Jessie about my

date with Ken. And before the meeting is over, I'll have her convinced that he's on the level."

"Why are you frozen here like a statue?" Alex was suddenly standing beside Kelly. She put her hands on her hips in imitation of Kelly's stance. "You look like Superman."

"Superwoman," Kelly corrected. "We can't forget about her, considering everything we're fighting for."

Laughing, the two friends entered the building.

"Come in, come in," said Donna, waving them through the office door.

"Where's everyone else?" Alex, peering into the office, saw only Jessie sitting at a large table.

"We're keeping it small on purpose." Jessie paused then added, "Really. We need to brainstorm, and Donna and I figured it would be easier with just the four of us."

Kelly stepped into the room. "Brainstorm? I thought everything was set. The boycott is on Saturday. What else is there?"

"Why don't we all get comfortable," said Donna, gesturing for Kelly and Alex to take seats, "and we can explain."

"Everything okay with Ken?" Jessie whispered to Kelly as she sat down next to her. She still didn't trust the guy, but she wanted Kelly to be happy.

Besides, she shouldn't jump to conclusions. Maybe he really did care about Kelly.

"Fine," Kelly answered. "We have a date later."

"Now," said Donna, pulling up a chair. "People know about the boycott, but they're not showing much interest in it. We have to do something to get their attention."

"How about a play?" Alex clapped her hands. "I could re-enact a scene out of history. Maybe from the suffragette movement? I could be Susan B. Anthony!"

Kelly and Jessie exchanged looks. "It might be better if we involved more people," Jessie said. "Not just one person giving a soliloquy."

Alex shrugged. "It could be very dramatic."

"I'm sure it would be," said Donna with a slight smile. "Let's try to think of other ideas, though."

Kelly, a notepad in front of her, had been lazily doodling, her mind more on Ken than on the meeting. She looked down at her scribbles. She'd written 32, Ken's number, again and again.

"Ken's football uniform," she mumbled half to herself, remembering the time he'd come to the clinic wearing his jersey. "I wonder if we can use it somehow. You know, we thought Ken's involvement would open people's eyes, but maybe they don't even know about it."

Jessie snapped her fingers. "That's terrific! We can have some sort of demonstration and display it there."

"We need more than that." Donna leaned forward, a serious expression on her face. She glanced at Alex. "We need a little drama."

Pacing back and forth across the room, Alex began to mutter and shake her head. "Drama, drama, drama."

"Talk about drama," Jessie said under her breath.

Suddenly, Kelly shot out of her seat. "I've got it! We can fly Ken's uniform on the campus flagpole!"

"Terrific!" Now Jessie was on her feet, too, shouting excitedly. "We can fly it at half-mast—you know, as a symbol that an era is dead. The era of male-dominated sports is over!"

Abruptly, Jessie stopped talking, a shadow crossing her face.

"What's wrong?" said Donna. "These are great ideas."

Jessie turned to Kelly. "Do you really think Ken would give you his uniform for something like this? It would be a major slap in the face to all his football buddies."

Kelly thought a moment, considering. Would he? She wasn't really sure. After all, she didn't know Ken very well. Giving his uniform to Women Unite

would take a lot of commitment to the cause. But she couldn't voice her doubts to Jessie. Jessie already thought Ken was a jerk, and this was a way to make her see what he was really like: a sensitive, caring guy.

"Of course he'd give us his uniform," Kelly said, sounding so positive she almost convinced herself. "I'll check with him when we go out tonight. But I'm sure of it!"

Donna pushed back her chair and stood up. "That's settled then. I suggest we hold the demonstration tomorrow afternoon, the day before the game. That should stir up some interest. Any questions?"

Alex raised her hand. "Can I hoist up the uniform? I can use my theatrical experience. I've mimed pulling on a rope dozens of times!"

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After the meeting broke up, Jessie walked Kelly back to campus. The two friends weren't saying much. But then Jessie touched Kelly lightly on the arm to get her attention.

"I want to apologize for saying those things about Ken," she told her. "I guess when I saw him with that girl the other night, it was perfectly innocent."

After all, Jessie reasoned, *he was just walking around with another student.* There was no law

against that. Maybe it was a study date. And as far as Slater's comments went—about Ken having a string of girlfriends—Jessie was willing to give the quarterback the benefit of the doubt. She knew those kinds of rumors had a way of being exaggerated. And even if they had been true, who's to say they were still true? People change.

Jessie pictured Slater, so accepting of her involvement in Women Unite. Not too long ago, her commitment would have been grounds for a breakup. But now things were different. They had both matured.

"You know, Kel," Jessie said out loud. "The more I think about this uniform demonstration, the more excited I get. We can make the whole thing really somber, like it's a funeral for the men's athletic budget. Maybe I should make a speech, too—a kind of elegy or memorial. What do you think?"

Kelly was about to say she wasn't sure about Ken, that maybe Jessie shouldn't get too excited about this flagpole demonstration until she got his approval. But one look at Jessie's face—half-apologetic for doubting Kelly's judgment, half-elated at what could happen at the demonstration—and Kelly didn't have the heart.

Kelly heard the strains of "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" coming from a radio in the dorm

across the way. It was Christmas, after all. And didn't Christmas always have a happy ending?

Smiling at Jessie, Kelly said, "A memorial speech sounds great. I know this demonstration is going to be a big success."

chapter 12

Kelly had said good-bye to Jessie and was making her way back to the suite when she heard someone call her name.

"Kelly, wait up! Please!" It was Leslie, waving her arm and hurrying to catch up.

Kelly slowed down. She'd barely spoken to Leslie all week, and Leslie certainly knew Kelly was still angry about the funding issue. Yet, Kelly found it difficult to be out-and-out rude.

"Hello," she said, sounding a little stiff.

"Listen, Kelly, I'm glad I caught you alone. Can we talk for a minute?"

Kelly nodded, so Leslie led her to a stone bench in a corner of the quad and sat her down. Leslie remained standing.

"My finals are over," she began tentatively.

"So are mine," said Kelly.

"Did you do okay?" Leslie asked.

"I think so. It's hard to tell, but I'm glad I'm finished with them."

"Me, too. I was really nervous, though. You know, taking my first college finals? I really wanted to do well, so I spent all my energy studying. I couldn't deal with our argument until I felt more in control, and I let the whole thing get out of hand. I know I should have tried to clear the air earlier, but I really want us to be friends again, Kelly. I'm sorry you think I've turned my back on you."

Leslie looked so earnest, Kelly smiled up at her. "I'm sorry, too." She shifted, so her back was facing Leslie. "Well, now we're even. I've turned my back on you, too." She turned around to Leslie again. "So we'll just have to be friends again!"

Leslie sat down and gave Kelly a hug. "You know, in my own way, I've been trying to make it up to you. You probably didn't realize it though."

"Really?" said Kelly. "So you're my Secret Santa? Thanks, Leslie! I love the stuffed penguin and the booties!"

"What? I was talking about cleaning the bathroom!"

Kelly laughed. "Oh, okay, Leslie, whatever you say. I understand."

"No, really, Kelly."

But Kelly didn't believe her. She just thought Leslie had made a slip and was trying to cover it up. *Well,* Kelly thought, *everything will come out at the formal dinner on Saturday, anyway. And I don't*

want to get into another argument—not when I have to get ready for my date!

# # #

There's nothing like dinner by candlelight, Kelly thought, staring across the table into Ken's eyes, *to make a date special.*

Kelly and Ken were at Mama's Pizza, Cal U's favorite dating place. The food was excellent, the atmosphere romantic, and Mama let you sit for hours after you'd eaten.

Ken was gazing back at Kelly. Reaching across the table, he gently took her hand in his. "How was your pizza?"

"Delicious. I appreciate that you didn't get anchovies—even on your half. Somehow, the flavor always seeps into the other slices."

"Anything for you, Kel," he said softly.

Kelly smiled. Zack always thought she was nutty about the anchovy issue. "Anchovies on my half, none on yours," he'd always say. "That's fair, isn't it?" Of course, he'd never get the anchovies no matter how much he bellyached, but still . . . did he have to give her such a hard time over it?

But now was the time to get down to business with Ken, Kelly decided. She'd been avoiding certain topics all night: Women Unite, the demonstration. The mood was just too romantic for that kind

of discussion. Soon the evening would be over though, so Kelly had to act before it was too late.

"I have to ask you something, Ken." Kelly bowed her head, so her hair would fall over her eyes. She was finding it tough to look at him.

"I said I'd do anything for you, Kelly. What is it?" Ken reached over and gently pushed back her hair.

"Women Unite is planning a big demonstration tomorrow afternoon."

"Sounds cool."

Kelly gathered up her courage. "Well, the thing is, we want to run a football uniform up the flagpole and fly it at half-mast. You know, to signify the death of sexism in sports?"

Ken narrowed his eyes, as if he knew what was coming. For an instant, Kelly faltered, thinking he'd just get up and leave without giving her a chance to explain. But the next moment, he had an interested expression on his face again and was stroking her hand softly.

"Go on," he said.

"Would you lend us your uniform?" Kelly held her breath, waiting for his answer.

Finally, Ken smiled crookedly, and Kelly's heart leaped. He was going to say yes! She was right about him all along!

"You can count on me," he told her.

After paying the check, Ken walked Kelly back to campus. He held Kelly's hand, while his other hand held his crutch firmly in place.

"I'm sorry I'm going so slowly," Ken said. "But at least now I'm down to one crutch."

"Pretty soon you'll be down to none," Kelly said, leaning into the crook of his arm. "And as far as I'm concerned, the slower we walk the better. You've been so sweet, I don't want tonight to end. Thanks, Ken."

"Think nothing of it. I'm just laying the groundwork."

"Huh?" Kelly was startled. Laying the groundwork for what?

"I mean," Ken said quickly, giving her hand a squeeze, "I'm laying the groundwork for equal funding."

"Oh." Kelly felt relieved. For a second there, she thought he was talking about *her*.

"Do you want to come over and pick up the uniform?" Ken continued.

"Listen, Ken," Kelly pressed his arm apologetically as they neared the dorms. "I'm really beat. Can you bring the uniform to the center tomorrow morning? I'm working, and you're scheduled for another X ray, aren't you?"

"Yep." Ken stopped walking and pulled Kelly

close. "Anything you say, sweetheart. If you promise me a rain check."

"Would you like to go to my dorm's Christmas dinner after the boycott?" Kelly asked. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "We can pick up where we left off."

Ken grinned. "Promise?"

Standing in the shadows, Zack shook his head in disgust. He'd just heard Ken give the same line to Dawn, Susan's suitemate, a few hours earlier: "Anything you say, sweetheart . . . I've got to be going, but will you promise me a rain check?" And then he had leaned in and kissed her, too.

There was no doubt about it: Ken Danvers was a slimebucket. It was all Zack could do to keep himself from running out and punching him in the nose. But he could just picture what would happen if he did: Kelly would get angry at him for losing his cool. Then, when he'd try to explain about Ken, she'd say he was making it all up to get her back. After all, Zack had heard Jessie trying to tell Kelly about that other girl. And if Kelly didn't believe Jessie, she certainly wouldn't believe Zack.

Zack's hands were tied. There was nothing he could do. *But one day Kelly will see the truth,* Zack promised himself. *And when she does, I'll be there to help her pick up the pieces.*

¤ ¤ ¤

"He said he'd do it, Jess!" Kelly was talking to Jessie on the phone, practically hopping up and down with excitement. "Ken said he'd give us his uniform!"

"Wow," said Jessie on the other end. "This is amazing. I'll get right to work on my speech.

"You know, Kelly," she added. "I was really wrong about Ken. I'm sorry."

"That's okay, Jessie. To tell you the truth, I was having doubts, also. But now I'm beginning to think this is the real thing. I just know we're going to have a great relationship. Ken's so willing to see my point of view. And listen to this, Jessie. He actually said he'd do anything for me. He's the exact opposite of Zack!"

¤ ¤ ¤

Whatever possessed me to come to the mall during Christmas week? The next morning, Zack was smack-dab in the middle of a mob, his nose pressed against an older woman's musty wool coat.

"Well, what else should I expect? I guess not everyone waits to do their shopping till Christmas Eve. Yuck, mothballs!" Zack said out loud, wrinkling his nose. "I need to get some air."

"Attention, shoppers!" a voice over the public address system announced. "Prices are being slashed right now at Harriet's House of Sewing. Get

your needles and thread at 40, 50, 60 percent off! And don't forget, sewing kits make terrific gifts!"

There was an instant rush toward the sewing shop. The mob moved quickly, one solid mass of motion.

"Oh, no!" moaned the old woman. "We're passing the pet store, and I still haven't gotten a Christmas present for my little Yorkie. I have to get over there or Precious will be devastated."

Zack felt pretty devastated himself. He'd been at the mall for hours now, going into store after store trying to find a Secret Santa gift for Kelly. The other night he'd come up with one pretty good gift, but he still needed the most important present: the one Kelly would open at the Christmas dinner; the one that would reveal his Secret Santa identity. It had to be something so terrific, so spectacular, Kelly would forget all about their boycott arguments—and Ken Danvers.

Just thinking of that sleazeball made Zack's blood boil. Well, he would just have to be the best Secret Santa possible and let everything else take care of itself.

In his head, Zack went over his buying options once more. Of course, his choices were limited because of his budget. But what about a sweater? No, too impersonal. A nightgown? No, that was too personal. Zack sighed, scanning the mall for more

ideas. A cutlery store was off to the right, but a set of steak knives definitely wasn't the thing to get.

"Excuse me, young man," the older woman in the wool coat was saying. "But would you mind helping me out of this crowd? I'd like to get to the pet store on the left."

"Of course," Zack said politely. He took her arm. "Make way! Coming through! Clear a path!" he said, leading them to an empty space in front of the store.

"Thank you, young man," the woman said, before going inside. "And I'm sure you'll get whatever you want for Christmas. Santa watches out for young people who help old ladies through crowds."

"You're not old, ma'am," Zack said gallantly. Then, thinking of Kelly, he added to himself, "And I doubt Santa can give me what I want."

Suddenly, Zack realized he was standing right next to the jewelry store, the one with the gold megaphone charm. Was this some kind of sign?

Stepping inside, Zack nodded at the salesclerk.

"Would you like to see the megaphone charm again?" she asked. "We still have it."

Zack looked in the case, and there it was, glittering under the fluorescent lights. The clerk reached in and took it out. "Come on," she urged, "feel how delicate it is."

Holding the charm gingerly in the palm of his

hand, Zack shook his head, torn about what to do. It really was perfect for Kelly. But the price! It was just too much.

Reluctantly, he handed it back to the clerk.

"Would you like to see something in a lower price range?" the clerk asked. "I know college students have to scrimp and save to get by." She winked at Zack. "You need a lot of money for that pizza fund, I'm sure."

Scrimp on Kelly? Just for a slice with anchovies? Suddenly, Zack was determined to buy the megaphone charm. Kelly deserved only the best. *Besides,* he thought, *you can't put a price tag on love.*

There was only one catch.

He didn't have the money.

chapter 13

B-r-i-n-g! Six o'clock in the morning, and Kelly's alarm was ringing insistently.

"All right already," she said sleepily, fumbling around to turn it off. "I hear you."

"We all hear it." Alex threw a pillow in the general direction of the noise.

"Sorry, guys," Kelly said, finally managing to turn off the alarm. "I'll get ready for work really quickly. I won't disturb you."

Alex burrowed back under the covers. "Too late for that."

"It's okay," Leslie said from her bed. "We know this is a big day for you."

Kelly flashed her a grateful smile. It was nice to have Leslie for a friend again.

A half hour later, Kelly was tying her freshly washed hair back in a ponytail and slipping into a pair of sneakers. "Wish me luck, guys," she whispered to her roommates.

"With Ken—or with the demonstration?" Leslie asked.

"See you there," Alex called after her. "Now let's pretend this early-morning dialogue never happened so I can get back to sleep."

When Kelly arrived at the clinic, Nurse Tompkins was already there, tapping her toe and looking impatient.

"It's about time you got here," she said.

Kelly checked her watch. "But I'm right on time!"

"Maybe you are, but emergencies don't punch a time clock."

"There's been an emergency?" Immediately, Kelly was on her guard, ready to take action.

"Not your standard emergency. It's Ken Danvers, coming back for another X ray. He'll be here in a few hours, and I'd like to be prepared, so I need someone to watch the phones."

"Well, I'm here now," Kelly said as nicely as she could. She, of all people, could understand why Ken Danvers caused such a stir. Still, the whole health center shouldn't revolve around one patient.

"Good. Why don't you put on the radio? They're playing Christmas songs all day on the school station."

Now Nurse Tompkins wanted music in the

office? Kelly shrugged. That was certainly fine by her. She flicked on the radio and started filing to "We Wish You a Merry Christmas." The music made the time pass faster, and before Kelly knew it, three hours had gone by.

"Hey, beautiful," Ken said smoothly from the doorway. "I just wanted to check in with you before I get checked out."

Kelly jumped up from her chair and hurried over. "Hi," she said. "How's the ankle?"

"I'll tell you after I get X-rayed. In the meantime, I have a little something for you."

He held out a bag.

"Great," said Kelly, peering inside. "You brought your uniform. But you probably should hurry; Nurse Tompkins is nutty about punctuality."

"Oh, there you are, Ken." Suddenly, Nurse Tompkins was hovering over them. "We were waiting for you in the X-ray room."

"I was just talking to Kelly," Ken said.

"Oh, no rush," Nurse Tompkins said quickly. "Whenever you're ready just swing on by." She smiled at Ken, frowned at Kelly, and strode back down the hall.

Ken grinned. "Guess I'd better get going." He tossed the bag over his shoulder. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Kelly sat back down at her desk, then twirled in

her seat. So far, everything was going perfectly. *I've even finished my work,* she thought. *And as soon as Ken gets out, we can leave together.*

An hour passed, and Kelly was growing nervous. Where was Ken? The rally was scheduled for noon, and it was already quarter till. Just then Ken walked into the office, smiling broadly.

"Where are your crutches?" Kelly said, surprised to see him getting around without them.

"The X rays showed that my ankle is healed. It happened much quicker than expected," Ken said. "It's still taped up, see?"

He showed Kelly his ankle, wrapped in a big bandage.

"But I'm going to be able to play in tomorrow's game!" Ken picked Kelly up and swung her off the ground. "Isn't that great news?"

"Hold on a minute." Kelly was having trouble digesting all this information. "Your ankle is healed?"

Ken nodded.

"That's great, Ken." Kelly smiled at him. "I'm really happy for you. But what did you say after that? Something about the game?"

"I'll be playing in tomorrow's game! The doctor said I'm officially off the injured list!"

Kelly took a step back. "You're going to play? What about the boycott? What about the demonstration? It's supposed to be starting right about now!"

"Well, it'll have to start without me," Ken said impatiently. "I couldn't very well go to the demonstration and then play in the game later, could I?"

Kelly didn't answer. "Listen, Kelly," he said in a voice so warm it could melt butter. "I don't want to have a scene here." He smiled over his shoulder at Nurse Tompkins, who was peeking curiously into the office.

"I promise you, I'll go to the demonstration, and maybe I won't play in the game after all. I'll decide later. Sweetheart, I'm still supporting Women Unite. But I've got to go over some things with Nurse Tompkins right now."

Nurse Tompkins nodded eagerly from the doorway.

"Why don't I meet you at the rally?"

"Okay," Kelly said slowly, unsure of what to do. Already she was running late, and if she waited any longer, the whole demonstration would be thrown out of whack. "Where's the bag with your uniform?"

Ken smacked his head. "I left it in the other room. I'll run and get it. Stay right here."

A minute later, Ken returned with the bag. In a real hurry now, Kelly grabbed it, and with one last searching look at Ken, raced away for the demonstration.

▫ ▫ ▫

"Where are you, Kelly?" Jessie was standing in the campus quadrangle—the Christmas tree at one end; she, Alex, and the flagpole at the other.

"Maybe we should start," said Alex, pacing in front of a huge Women Unite banner. "I'm sure Kelly will be here any minute. It's not like her to be late."

She gazed out over the quad, eyeing the passers-by. Occasionally, someone would stop, ask what was going on, and settle in to watch. Alex was afraid they'd lose interest if something didn't happen soon. She knew how short an audience's attention span could be.

Jessie shrugged. "I'm just not sure. I'd like everything to be in place before I begin my speech."

Susan and Dawn, who had stopped by a few minutes ago, were loudly discussing whether they should stay or go.

"It's not as if a little demonstration will change our minds about going to the game tomorrow," Susan was saying in a raised voice. "We might as well leave."

"Yeah," said Dawn. "I think there's a pep rally down by the gym. Let's check it out."

Jessie and Alex exchanged looks, then Jessie nodded. Before they could go, she began.

"Attention, Cal U students," Jessie announced, speaking into a battery-operated microphone.

A few more people gathered around.

"We're here today to lay to rest—but definitely not to honor—a tradition that should have been buried a long time ago."

As Jessie spoke, Alex put on a long black jacket and a black top hat. Wearing a serious expression, she was doing her best to look like a funeral director.

"What am I talking about, friends?" Jessie continued. "I'm talking about male-dominated sports. I'm talking about the old athletic budget, with 80 percent of the money going to men's teams."

Jessie's voice rose with emotion. A crowd was forming, drawn in by her conviction.

Alex stood at attention, but her eyes were darting all around. Where was Kelly?

"I'm saying those traditions are dead," Jessie continued. "And it's time for women to usher in a new era. One of equality and change."

A murmur went through the crowd.

"You know," one sophomore said to her roommate, "this really makes sense."

"Sports and athletics are woven into the very fabric of this country. If we don't take a stand, if we don't make some waves about funding"—Jessie paused—"if we don't boycott tomorrow's game, we can't expect equality anywhere!"

A cheer rang out, followed by another and

another. Jessie couldn't believe it. The crowd was hers!

"Now," she said, "a certain football player . . ." Her eyes swept the faces in front of her. No Kelly—and no Ken, either. She'd wait to use his name. Meanwhile, she'd just tease the crowd a bit. "A certain football *star* . . . is supporting our cause."

The sophomore drew in her breath, surprised.

"He's agreed to boycott the game," Jessie announced.

The sophomore's roommate gasped.

"And he's agreed to donate his uniform, so we can fly it at half-mast in memory of a bygone age."

Jessie searched the crowd again. Finally! There was Kelly, pushing her way through the rows of people, hurrying to the flagpole.

"I've got it," she whispered breathlessly to Jessie and Alex. "Keep talking."

Jessie nodded, while Kelly and Alex fumbled with the bag. Rushing to hoist the uniform, they kept their eyes on the crowd, trying to gauge when they should let it loose.

"So," Jessie was saying solemnly, looking down at the ground, "let us bow our heads. Let us ponder old times and new. Let us say good-bye to the era of inequality and salute its passage."

She raised her head to salute Ken's uniform flying at half-mast. But her hand stayed limply at her

side. Jessie was in shock. Something was waving in the air, but it wasn't a football uniform. It was a hospital gown!

The crowd went crazy—laughing, pointing, and carrying on.

"Does this mean men's sports died on the operating table?"

"No, it means men's sports have been saved! Hooray for football!"

Kelly looked around, amazed. Ken must have taken the uniform out and put the gown in when he went back to get the bag. How could he do such a thing? He'd lied to her, humiliated her and her friends.

Kelly caught her breath, trying not to cry. The demonstration had been turned into a joke—thanks to one double-crossing football player named Ken Danvers.

chapter 14

Late-afternoon sunlight filtered through the closed blinds in Kelly's dorm room. She sat amid half-empty boxes, too upset to finish packing for Christmas vacation and too tired to push them away.

This is it, Kelly thought, wrapping her arms around her knees and hugging herself tightly. *The pitiful end to my pitiful first semester at college.*

How could she have been so stupid? How could Ken have been so mean? He was a first-class slime—using Women Unite to get to her; only she'd been too blind to see it.

Kelly opened her mouth to take a deep breath, and a sob escaped. She had really thought Ken was different. She thought he cared.

Just then Kelly heard a soft knock at the door. She'd already told Jessie, Alex, and Leslie that she wanted to be alone. "Who is it?" she asked, trying to keep her voice controlled.

"It's Mike. May I come in?"

Mike Rogers—ex-football player and current dorm leader—what would he say to her? He'd probably side with Ken. After all, he was a Falcons fan from way back.

"I'd like to talk to you, Kelly," Mike said. "Maybe I can help."

Hesitantly, Kelly opened the door. Then she saw Mike's kind, sympathetic face, and she burst into tears.

Mike was flustered. "Aw, Kel. I never know what to say when someone's crying. Here." He thrust a big hankie at her and turned away. "Nice cardboard box. Did you get it at Burton's?"

Kelly had to smile. Mike was just making silly conversation until she could gain control of herself.

"You're not planning on going home for vacation and never coming back, are you?" he said. "There's an awful lot of boxes here."

Kelly shook her head. "No," she said, still sniffling. "I guess I got carried away, looking for something to take my mind off . . . things."

Kelly dabbed her eyes with the hankie, then turned to Mike. "I'm okay now. I think we can talk."

Mike looked at her, concerned. "That's good. I hope you're feeling up to the formal dinner tonight. You haven't forgotten about it, have you?"

"No, I haven't forgotten. I'm just not sure I want to go." Kelly kicked a pair of rolled-up socks across

the floor. The formal dinner, where she was supposed to go with Ken as her date, was the last place she wanted to be.

"I've definitely lost the Christmas spirit, and I don't think I'm going to get it back." She walked across the room to toss the socks into a carton. "I just want to go home."

Mike gave her a clumsy bear hug. "Well, you know you can always change your mind, Kel. Whatever you decide, I'll understand. But I've got to get going now. I've got a million things to do before the dinner."

Kelly started to say good-bye, but Mike stopped her. "I just want to say one more thing. I heard what happened this afternoon."

Kelly tried to smile. What would Mike say about the demonstration fiasco? He'd been against the boycott from the very beginning.

"I think a certain football player better wise up," Mike continued. "He can't treat people like that!"

Kelly sighed with relief. Mike understood. "It's a good thing all football players don't have the sensitivity of our star quarterback," she said dryly. "Otherwise, you and I wouldn't even be talking now."

"Hang in there, Kelly." Mike patted her head. "I'll see you later."

Mike closed the door behind him, and Kelly, feeling slightly better, decided to finish packing. But

then she heard a soft swishing noise—something was being pushed under her door.

It was another Secret Santa gift: a flat package wrapped in red and green paper.

Leave it to my own personal Santa, Kelly thought, bending down to pick it up, *to try to cheer me up at just the right time.* She opened the door, expecting to see Leslie on the other side, but no one was there.

"Oh, well," said Kelly, tearing off the wrapping paper. "I'll just see what it is and thank her afterward."

When Kelly saw the gift though, she realized her Secret Santa wasn't Leslie after all.

Maybe it's Slater, Kelly thought, gazing at a prettily framed picture of the gang from Bayside High. Zack, Slater, Screech, Jessie, Kelly, and Lisa Turtle were all in the photo—with Kelly flanked by Zack and Jessie. They were all wearing green-and-red-striped scarves and holding mistletoe above their heads. Zack was puckered up for a kiss. Of course! Kelly remembered when this picture was taken: their senior year, right before the Christmas dance.

Suddenly, old Christmas memories hit Kelly like a ton of bricks. She and Zack dancing in front of her parents' Christmas tree when they were seventeen. The gang making eggnog in junior high; going caroling in elementary school. There were so many memories, so many good times.

And here she was, feeling sorry for herself during the holidays. She had so much to be grateful for.

"I can't just sit around and mope," she told herself. "I'm going to get back into the spirit. I'm going to the dinner!"

Moving like a person with a mission, Kelly went to the closet. "Now, what should I wear?" Her eyes caught sight of her brand-new booties.

Suddenly, Kelly remembered—everybody's Secret Santa would be revealed at the dinner, and she hadn't given her person one single gift.

Of course, there was a reason for that. Her person was Zack: ex-boyfriend, ex-friend. But this was the season for forgiving—or at least giving—and she was dead wrong not to have given Zack some gifts.

Well, I'll have to make up for it now with one really big gift, Kelly decided. *What can I afford to spend?*

Kelly riffled through her cartons, pulling out stuffed animals, clothes, and books, trying to find her checkbook. At last, she found it. But when she looked at her balance, her heart sank.

"There's only enough to get me home for the holidays," Kelly moaned.

She had to get money somehow. What could she do? Then she saw her jewelry box in the bottom

of the carton, and she got an idea. Slowly, Kelly reached for the box. . . .

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"Hole in one!" Screech and Alex were in the dorm lounge, playing miniature golf on the green carpet. Screech had just made a shot through Alex's legs, into an empty orange juice can. "I'm going to be my team's star player next semester!"

Alex grinned. "Not bad, Screech. But try it again—and this time I'll do jumping jacks."

"Hmm. The windmill effect. Could be an effective training tool," Screech mused.

"Well, let's keep our training tools to ourselves. We wouldn't want any men's teams to use our ideas."

"Speaking of men's teams . . ." Screech pulled a pair of tickets out of his pocket. "My Secret Santa gave me these this morning. They're tickets to a professional wrestling match."

Screech shook his head sadly. "My Secret Santa doesn't know me at all. First there was that tie, then some baseball caps, now this. I can't use this stuff."

"I know what you mean; they're really not you."

"Secret Santas should put thought into their gifts, try to make the recipient happy." Screech stuck out his chest proudly. "Like my gifts to Susan. Today I gave her a moldy piece of bread from my

penicillin experiment. What better way to show I care about her health?"

"You're one in a million, Screech," Alex said, slapping his back. "But it is a shame about those tickets. Too bad we're not speaking to Slater. He would love to have them."

"I know." Screech dropped his miniature golf club and held his arms out so he'd look like an old-fashioned scale. "On one hand, there's Slater—friend of many years. On the other hand, there's Women Unite. Slater or Women Unite?"

Screech pretended to weigh the choices, moving his hands up and down. Just then Zack and Slater came into the lounge, tossing a football back and forth. "Slater? Women Unite?" Screech said again, shifting the pretend weights.

"Looks like Screech has taken up a new coed sport," Slater said with a grin. "Hand aerobics."

"Is that what it is?" asked Zack. "I thought he was juggling. You know, it's really a tragedy. I've heard the school juggling team is terribly underfunded. But not being able to afford anything to juggle? That's just a catastrophe!"

Screech angrily put down his arms. "Women Unite," he and Alex said together.

"Huh?" said Slater.

"Just taking a stand," Alex said smugly.

"What kind of stand?" Zack put in. "A lemonade stand to raise money for Women Unite? You guys need all the help you can get."

Zack was feeling vaguely guilty for talking like this—it was this kind of teasing that had gotten him into trouble in the first place. Still, there was something about the situation, and Alex's oh-so-serious face, that demanded stupid jokes. "Or maybe it's a grandstand," he added. "Considering how much grandstanding you do."

Alex leaped onto the couch. "No, it's a stand to make the world a better place for women. Boycott, boycott, boycott." Alex started the chant in a whisper, but after a while she raised her voice to a shout.

"Boycott! Boycott! Boycott!" Screech joined in.

Slater and Zack nodded at each other.

Zack, grabbing the golf club like a baton, began marching like a drum major. "Football, football, football!" he cried.

Slater fell into step behind him. "Football! Football! Football!"

"Boycott! Boycott! Boycott!"

"Football! Football! Football!"

Slater and Zack marched out of the lounge, down the hall, and outside. Screech and Alex followed close behind.

"Boycott! Boycott! Boycott!"

"Football! Football! Football!"

The two groups marched around campus, trying to outshout each other.

Screech waved merrily at Susan as they passed her by, but she pointedly ignored him.

"Hello, Dean McMann," Zack boomed at one point, breaking the chant to score some points with the administrator. "You look lovely this afternoon."

The dean was talking to someone who looked familiar to Zack, but he couldn't quite place him. The two were deep in conversation, and Dean McMann barely glanced at the marching groups. When the dean was joined by Donna Klein from Women Unite, Zack stopped trying to get her attention.

Then, all the marchers strode past Coach Saroyan. He was talking with Mike Rogers, and both men looked up briefly as Slater called their names. But instead of acknowledging the "pro-football" group, they quickly went back to their conversation.

Hmm, that's odd, Zack thought as they circled the quad one last time. Dean McMann, Donna Klein, Coach Saroyan, and Mike Rogers—none of them were showing much support for either group. What was going to happen at the game?

chapter 15

It was a cool, crisp night. As Kelly put on her green velvet dress and tied her hair back with a red ribbon, she was thinking about the Christmas dinner.

It really is a perfect night for it, she thought, looking into the mirror for a final inspection.

Someone knocked at the door. Kelly whirled around, patting her hair nervously. The rest of the suite had already left for the party, but Kelly was running late because of her last-minute shopping. Who could it be?

Maybe it was Zack.

It seemed like ages ago, but Zack *had* once said they'd go to the dinner together. Of course, that was before Jessie and the boycott, before their breakup, and before Ken Danvers.

But Kelly had been thinking of Zack nonstop since she saw that old Christmas photo. Had she been unfair to him this past week? Too quick to take

offense? If he *were* standing on the other side of the door, would she apologize?

The door creaked open slowly. Kelly let out her breath. It was only Screech, holding a wilted daisy in his hand.

"May I escort you to the Christmas dinner?" Screech asked, bowing as he held out the flower. "For your hair," he explained.

"Oh, Screech, you're sweet." Knowing her friends cared really did make Kelly feel better. But one practically dead daisy? Kelly glanced in the mirror again at her carefully done-up hair. "Why don't I just put the daisy in water? That way it will stay alive longer."

Screech nodded. "You know, Kelly, this isn't really a date," he said, shuffling his feet. "I'll always be there if you need me. But Susan will be opening my last Secret Santa gift tonight, and if she wants to spend the rest of the night thanking me . . ." Screech trailed off.

Kelly kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Don't worry, Screech. I'll make myself scarce."

Arm in arm, the two friends headed for the dining room. When they got there, they saw that the room was decorated lavishly: Embroidered linen tablecloths disguised the old, battered tables; Christmas candles cast a soft glow; and there were

dozens of presents piled underneath a tree in one corner.

People were milling about, dressed in their finest clothes. Kelly couldn't believe how different everyone looked—the guys in suits and ties, and the girls in long dresses.

Then Mike Rogers tapped a glass with a knife signaling everyone to settle down.

Squirming uncomfortably in his suit, Mike tugged at the neck a couple of times, muttering, "The things I do for you kids."

"Now," he said more clearly, "you'll notice there are seating cards on the table in the front. Find your name with your table number, then please take a seat. Guests' names," he nodded at Jessie, "are also there."

Kelly was at table number five along with Screech, Jessie, Alex, Leslie, Slater, and Zack. This was the first time they'd all been together since the big disagreement, and an awkward silence hung over the group as they jockeyed for position. Everyone wanted to sit next to someone they were still speaking to, and it was turning into a game of musical chairs.

Finally, Mike came over. "Stop! he ordered. "Everyone sit down now."

They sat.

From across the table, Kelly snuck a look at

Zack. Carefully rearranging his silverware as if it were the most important project in the world, Zack seemed uneasy. Everybody seemed uncomfortable, in fact, except for Screech.

"I'm starving!" Screech said, announcing it to the table at large. "Nothing like an afternoon boycott march to work up an appetite."

Oh no, Kelly thought. She didn't want to be reminded of the boycott—or that afternoon's demonstration. As far as she was concerned, the issue was dead. She never wanted to think of football, or football players, again. In fact, she was hoping Jessie would just cancel everything. Kelly had given up.

Slater groaned, too. The boycott was the last thing he wanted to talk about. Jessie had been so busy getting organized these past few days, he'd barely seen her at all. And here she was, sitting so close he could smell her perfume. He wanted to reach out and take her hand, but he had to pretend she didn't exist.

Suddenly, he felt a hand grasp his under the table. Why did Zack want to hold his hand? True, he was going through a rough time now, but still . . . Then Slater realized it was Jessie. Looking casually in the opposite direction, he gave her hand a squeeze.

"Hey," said Slater, nodding at the swinging

doors leading into the kitchen. "Here comes the chow."

Mike was just carrying in a huge, steaming turkey. "Well, this takes care of me," he said, his eyes twinkling. "What are you guys having?"

Behind Mike, the dining room staff appeared with five more turkeys, cranberries, honey-glazed ham, and every vegetable imaginable.

"Mmm, it all looks so good," Kelly said, eager to have the food on the table. *While everyone's busy eating, we won't have to worry about making conversation,* she reasoned.

After dinner, the individual tables began to break up. Some people decided to take walks to work off the meal, some just relaxed.

Suddenly, Kelly and Zack found themselves alone at the table. "Listen," Zack began. "I know—"

"Hi, kids," boomed Mike, coming over to clap Zack on the back. "Can you do me a favor? The dining room staff went home, and I need some help in the kitchen. Would you two bring out the eggnog for the Christmas toast?"

The opportunity gone, Kelly and Zack went into the kitchen, not saying a word to each other. They pushed open the doors, and Zack said, "I wonder where it—Oops!"

They'd barged right in on a couple, kissing passionately by the walk-in freezer. The couple broke

apart when they heard the noise and, turning around, said simultaneously, "Zack! Kelly!"

"Jessie! Slater!" said Zack and Kelly. The secret was out.

Kelly's mouth hung open in surprise. "Why—when—what's going on?"

Jessie sighed. "Let's just admit everything, Slater. To tell the truth, this hide-and-go-kiss stuff is driving me crazy."

Slater nodded.

"Slater and I are back together," Jessie said. "I'm glad it's finally out in the open."

"B-b-but"—Kelly was having trouble getting the words out—"what about Women Unite? The boycott? How could you be dating the enemy?"

"Yeah," Zack put in. "Where's your pride, man?"

Slater took a step forward, a menacing look in his eyes. "What do you mean, 'pride,' preppie? Just look at Jessie. She's gorgeous, sure. But she's also standing up for what she believes in. Talk about pride—I'm proud we're together, I'm proud of what she does, and most of all, I'm glad she's not forcing me to take her side of the issue."

Whew! Slater wasn't used to making speeches, and even he was taken aback.

"That was beautiful, Slater." Jessie gave him a smooch.

All at once, the door swung open. Mike stood

there, scowling. "We're waiting for the eggnog, guys. You take any longer and it'll be a New Year's toast."

"We're coming!" Zack said quickly, motioning for Kelly to get the pitchers. He grabbed a tray, and a minute later they were handing out drinks in the dining room.

Kelly was too busy to talk, and she was glad. It gave her more time to think. She'd already been wondering if she'd been too hasty breaking up with Zack. But now, seeing Jessie and Slater together, she realized something else: Just because she and Zack disagreed about the boycott didn't mean they had to break up. And deep down Kelly knew that for all his joking around, Zack believed in equal rights for men and women. Definitely more than that smooth-talking, double-dealing Ken did!

But how could Kelly tell all this to Zack? She couldn't. She'd just have to let her Secret Santa gift say it for her.

Just then Mike tapped his glass again. "Does everybody have their eggnog? Okay, then, I'd like to make a toast."

He stood up, facing the room. "To good grades, good times, good friends."

"And good gifts," added Screech, downing his drink and leaving a creamy mustache. "Isn't it time to open our final Secret Santa presents?"

"You bet!" said Mike.

There was a mad run for the Christmas tree, and people began searching for their gifts. Zack sighed, staying right where he was.

"Aren't you going to look for your gift?" Kelly asked, coming over to him.

"Why bother? I haven't gotten one present yet."

"You never know." Kelly grinned. "This is Christmas, after all."

It must be Christmas, Zack thought. *Kelly's being nice to me! Does it mean anything? No. Knowing Kelly, it's just her way of spreading good cheer. A Christmas thaw.*

"Okay," said Zack. "But you've got to come with me." At the very least, he'd be able to spend a little time with her.

Zack and Kelly made their way through the crowd. Only two gifts were left under the tree: one labeled "For Kelly," the other, "For Zack."

"Finally!" said Zack, shaking his package carefully. "My Secret Santa remembered me!"

Quickly, he ripped off the paper. Inside the box was some sort of heavy gold stand.

"Huh?" said Zack, not sure what it was. "I know this is expensive, but that's all I know!"

"It's a football stand," Kelly explained. "For your autographed football. Remember? It's your most prized possession."

How did Kelly know what the gift was for? Zack scanned the card: "With love from your Secret Santa, Kelly."

"Kelly! You gave this to me! It's terrific!" Then, suddenly, he got a funny look on his face.

Kelly didn't notice. She stood there and smiled, still holding her gift in her hand.

"Now open yours," Zack said.

Kelly opened the small jewelry box. Gasping, she drew out the megaphone charm. "It's so beautiful," she whispered.

"Read the inscription," Zack urged.

"'To Kelly, a sweetheart of a high school cheerleader.'" She turned to Zack. "It's from you, isn't it?"

Grinning widely, Zack nodded. "I thought it would go perfectly with your gold chain. Why don't you get it now and try it on?"

Kelly turned red.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"It's just that . . . it's just . . . I sold my chain."

"But you love that chain! Why'd you sell it?"

"I needed the money to . . ." Kelly trailed off, hesitant to tell Zack the truth.

"To buy my football stand," Zack finished for her. "I can't believe you sold your chain to buy me a gift!"

More than anything, Kelly wanted to put her arms around him and say, "It was nothing. You're

worth a dozen gold chains." Instead she said, "How could you afford this megaphone? It must have cost a fortune!"

Zack ducked his head, just as reluctant to answer. But once again, Mike strolled over, breaking the silence. "Thanks for selling me that autographed football, Zack. I want you to know I'll take good care of it."

"Zack!" Kelly gasped as Mike walked away. "You didn't! You said you'd never sell it—not for all the money in the world!"

"Well," said Zack, trying to sound modest, "as it turned out, it wasn't for all the money in the world. Just enough to buy this charm." He lowered his voice. "For my best friend."

"Oh, Zack." Finally, Kelly put her arms around him, kissing him tenderly. "I can't believe you were my Secret Santa all along."

"Actually, I *can* believe you were mine. That explains why I wasn't getting any gifts!"

The two looked at each other and laughed. But then their faces turned serious. They'd just realized what had happened: They'd each sold a precious possession to buy a gift for the other; and both had wound up with gifts they couldn't use. Except it didn't make a difference, because now they had each other.

# # #

On the other side of the room, Susan was just about to open her gift.

"I wonder what it is," said Carla, standing next to her.

"I'm not sure. But I hope it's not something gross."

Screech, a few feet away, couldn't make out their words. But he was watching the two anxiously, keeping his eyes focused on Susan's face.

Screech thought this last gift was his best present yet: a lifelike model of his heart, complete with cherry soda pumping through the arteries. He was giving Susan his heart. How could she refuse it?

"Well, here goes," said Susan. She ripped off the paper. "What?" Her eyes widened in shock. Suddenly, the heart began to beat. Screech had put a delayed timer in it, and now the clock was ticking.

"Yuck! It *is* gross!" said Susan, shouting loud enough for Screech to hear. She dropped his heart, and it plunged to the ground.

Screech closed his eyes in despair. He'd been so sure Susan would understand . . . would embrace his gifts the way he hoped she would embrace him. But now his hopes were dashed—along with his heart. He couldn't bear to watch it break.

Expecting to hear a loud crash, Screech put his fingers in his ears. Nothing happened. Slowly, Screech opened his eyes. Carla was cradling the heart in her arms. She had saved it!

Across the room, their eyes locked. Screech took a step forward, his face lit up with joy.

"You're the Secret Santa?" Carla said, her voice trembling.

Screech nodded, taking another step forward.

As if in slow motion, the two moved closer together . . . and closer still . . . until their faces were barely an inch apart.

"I loved your gifts," Carla whispered. "I've kept every one of them."

So that's what happened to the X ray, Screech thought. Carla had taken it. But he wasn't thinking about the skull anymore, or the lab rat, or the moon rock. The only thing that mattered was Carla.

"Uh, Carla?" he said, pointing to the ceiling.

Carla looked up and smiled. They were standing under mistletoe.

chapter 16

"That was the best meal I ever had." Screech was smiling, holding Carla's hand after the Christmas dinner. Everyone was crowded around them outside the dining hall, reluctant to say good-night.

All the good feelings of the holiday, prompted by Mike's toast, had softened everyone's mood.

"We have to be friends," Alex had sobbed earlier to Leslie and Slater. "I need you in the audience for my first Broadway play."

There'd been smiles, a group hug, and even a few tears—until Screech got his emotions under control.

"Wait a minute," Kelly was saying now. "Who was your Secret Santa, Screech?"

Carla grinned. "That was my suitemate Dawn. No wonder Screech didn't like his gifts."

"But I'm putting them to good use," Screech told everyone. "The preppie tie is going to Zack, and I've promised Slater the wrestling tickets."

"That's cool," said Slater. "I've been so caught up in things"—he winked at Jessie—"I've neglected my Secret Santa person. But the tickets will come in handy. I told Mike I'd take him to the match as my present."

Kelly looped her arm through Zack's and looked at all her friends. "It seems like everything is working out. This Christmas hasn't turned out half bad."

"But there is the little matter of the boycott," Jessie put in grimly. "That demonstration made us the laughingstock on campus. I'm not sure about going through with anything now. What are we going to do?"

"I'll tell you what we're going to do," Kelly said, moving closer to Jessie. Suddenly, she felt strong. Reunited with Zack and her friends, she was capable of anything. "We're going to have that boycott—Ken Danvers or no Ken Danvers."

Screech went to stand with them. "Yeah. Let's go through with it. Football game or no football game, we'll have that boycott."

Carla giggled at his nonsense. "Screech, you're amazing!"

"Well, of course I am," Screech said gallantly. "It just took someone as wonderful as you to realize it."

"Come on," Slater said, making a face. "Seeing Screech in love is enough to make me lose it." He

turned to leave. "Is everyone coming back to the suite?"

"No." Kelly grabbed Screech and Alex by the arms. "We're going back to Women Unite headquarters with Jessie. We've got a boycott to plan!"

# # #

That night Kelly, Jessie, Alex, and Screech stayed up late, going over their boycott strategy. Finally, they came up with a simple plan: to form a picket line by the football field right before the game started.

Jessie rubbed her eyes. "I don't know about this. The rally was such a bomb. Do you think people will really come out and support us?"

"We can hope," Kelly said, pouring everyone another cup of coffee. "I'm going to sound like a major sap, but isn't this the season of hope?"

Alex stretched and yawned. "This one night feels like an entire season. Can we get some sleep soon?"

"Sleep? Who needs sleep?" Screech was busy painting protest signs. He'd just finished BOYCOTT, GIRLCOTT, WE COTT TO STOP THAT! and was pausing before taking on the next: ATHLETICS: NOT JUST FOR JOCKS! "I can stay up all night," he said.

Jessie smiled at him. "That's because you're in love. You feel so good, you think you don't need anything except Carla."

"Well, I've had it." Alex stood up. "Is it okay if we bunk here tonight?"

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Jessie said warmly. In the short time that she'd known Alex, she already felt like she'd made a real friend.

"That's okay," Screech said, reaching for more paint. "You girls get some sleep. I'll finish up a few more of these and see you in the morning."

Kelly tapped him on the head, "Thanks, Screech. 'Night."

Jessie and Alex said good-night, as well, and soon they were all fast asleep.

Early the next morning, the three girls woke up and were greeted by poster after poster lining the floors and walls.

"I feel like I'm in a protest museum," Jessie said with a laugh, picking up one that said PEACE—NOT FOOTBALL. "Great job, Screech."

Then Jessie's laugh turned into a sigh, and she sat down heavily, barely missing the wet paint that had spilled on the floor. "But these are an awful lot of signs for the four of us to carry. And I don't think anyone else is going to show."

Even Alex, still padding around headquarters in her pajamas, was beginning to feel dispirited about the whole thing. Last night they'd had all this energy, pumped into them by the Christmas dinner and

its good-fellowship spirit. But now it seemed like they were four people against the world.

"Well, I guess we'd better get going," Kelly said halfheartedly. "We don't have much time before the game."

Moving slowly, the four friends got dressed, then gathered up all the picket signs.

"Here goes nothing," Jessie said.

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Struggling with the picket signs, Jessie and the others rounded the last bend before the football field, intent on carrying their loads.

"Whew!" said Jessie, dropping the posters on the ground in front of the gate. "That was tough work."

"Maybe you needed some big, strong arms to help you."

"Slater!" Jessie whirled around to face him. "What are you doing here?"

Slater nodded at Zack and Leslie, who were standing with him. "Same thing as these guys. We're here to protest!"

Leslie clenched her fist and tentatively raised it above her head. "We shall come over?" she said, in a questioning voice.

"That's 'overcome,' Leslie. But you bet we will." Zack reached for Kelly's hand. "We couldn't let you stand here alone, Kel. We're all together on this—

even if we don't agree. Even if some of us had tickets to the season's most important game. You've got to know you have our friendship and support."

Jessie threw her arms around Slater. "You guys are the best!" Then she grinned at Alex. "I can see why you used to be interested in him."

Alex smiled back. "I can see why he's interested in you."

"So, it's okay?" Jessie asked. "I mean, that Slater and I are together?"

"Of course it is," Alex said. "But what a time to ask! Don't we have a game to boycott?"

Just then Carla rushed over. "Is it all right if I join you?"

"It's more than all right," Screech said, practically hopping up and down.

"Grab a picket sign, everyone!" Jessie shouted. "This boycott has officially started!"

A little while later, people began to arrive for the game.

"Boycott, boycott!" the friends all chanted, marching up and down the length of the field. "Equal rights, equal funding!"

People eyed them curiously; some stopped to take Women Unite pamphlets and some cheered them on. But eventually, they all headed through the gate to take their seats for the game.

Soon there was a steady stream of people mov-

ing into the stands. Nobody was giving up their tickets to join their ranks. Once again, Jessie thought the boycott was a losing battle.

"I'm about ready to call it quits," she told Kelly.

Kelly nodded. Clearly, the protest wasn't working. Had all their hard work come to this?

"You did the best you could, Jessie. We all did," Kelly encouraged.

"I know," Jessie sighed. "I just feel as if I didn't make a difference. It's as though nobody noticed what we were saying, that women *should* get equal funding for sports. I'm sure of it. But nothing will ever change."

Slater and Zack came up behind them. "Something's up," Slater said, pointing to the parking lot. A local news van had just pulled in, and Dean McMann was going over to talk to the driver.

"Hey, that's Rock Anders," Zack said, finally recognizing the reporter from the clinic. "That's the guy who was talking to Dean McMann the other day. He wasn't wearing his newscaster jacket, so I couldn't place him right off. But it looks like he's here to do a story."

"I bet it's a follow-up piece on Ken and his miraculous recovery," Kelly said grimly.

"Well, he's not here to cover this feeble attempt at a boycott, that's for sure," said Jessie. "Let's pack it in, gang."

"Wait a minute." Kelly was shading her eyes, trying to see what was going on. "I think Donna's with them!"

Sure enough, Dean McMann and Donna Klein were leading Rock Anders straight toward the protest group.

"These are the students I told you about," Dean McMann was saying. She gave a puzzled glance at Zack and Slater. "And a few more students, as well," she added. "I think they have an important message that should be heard."

"Way to go, Dean!" Zack said under his breath.

Rock Anders motioned his camera crew to set up. "Who's the spokesperson here?" he asked.

Zack and Slater pushed Jessie forward. "She is."

"Well, young lady? The cameras are rolling. Would you like to speak?"

Jessie tossed her curls. "Definitely," she said, sounding like the old strong-willed, never-give-up Jessie.

She began to talk, explaining why they were protesting, what they were hoping to accomplish, and all about Women Unite. "All we're aiming for is equality," she said eloquently. "Is that so much to ask?"

Suddenly, she stopped short. Coach Saroyan was standing just beyond camera range, waving to get Rock Anders's attention. Jessie groaned. Just

when she was getting somewhere, the football coach shows up!

"If I could interrupt a moment," the reporter was saying into the microphone. "We have Coach Saroyan with us now, as well. And it seems he has something to say. Coach?"

Zack slipped his hand into Kelly's. This could only mean trouble.

"Is this thing on?" The coach tapped the microphone nervously.

"Yes," Rock told him. "Go ahead."

"Well . . . uh . . ." He faced the camera and turned red.

"Go on, Coach," Rock urged.

"I'd just like to say I support Women Unite 100 percent."

"What?" Jessie gasped.

"I never really thought about athletic funding before. But I have a daughter who will be going to Cal U next year. She's a superb athlete. I'd hate to see her shortchanged just because she's a girl."

Then Coach Saroyan turned to Jessie. "This boycott got me thinking. And that's the first step toward change—getting people to think."

Coach Saroyan shook Jessie's hand. "My hat is off to you, young lady, because that's exactly what you've accomplished."

Everyone burst into spontaneous applause, then Rock told the crew it was a wrap.

The coach shook hands with Zack, then Slater. "I'm still expecting you to try out for the team next year," he told Slater. "It's great to get involved in women's causes, but let's not forget that plenty of women like football."

"Yeah," said Screech, squeezing into the group. "Just look at all the women in the stands!"

The coach glanced at the football field and smiled. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a football game to win."

"Hey, you're not boycotting?" Screech yelled at the coach as he hurried to the field.

"That's okay, Screech," said Jessie, patting him on the back. "We can't expect the world to change overnight. Remember the first step is getting people to think. And that man is definitely thinking!"

¤ ¤ ¤

A little later, everyone was back in the suite, packing their belongings and getting ready for Christmas vacation.

"I can't believe it's all over," Slater said, tossing a pair of sneakers into a suitcase.

Jessie was sitting on his bed, watching. "I know. It was really something, though, wasn't it?"

"You're really something." Slater leaned over

and kissed her softly. "What's going to happen to us now, Jess?"

Slater's voice quivered a little as he continued. "Here we've just found each other again, and next semester we'll go back to our separate little worlds."

Jessie smiled, a sad, sweet smile that tugged at Slater's heart.

"Who knows what will happen between us," she said quietly. "But I know one thing: We've been closer than we've ever been before." Her hand found his. "And we'll always have the boycott."

Outside in the common room, Kelly was gathering together some CDs she wanted to take home, and Zack was doing a final sweep of the kitchen.

"What was Dean McMann telling you back there?" Kelly asked Zack. "I noticed you two deep in conversation about something."

Zack grinned. "She was totally impressed with my involvement in Women Unite. And she told me she'd talk to our anthropology professor about letting me take a makeup final. Since we've been studying women leaders in different cultures, she thought my commitment to women's causes should have some kind of academic reward."

"So this holiday *is* turning out just fine," Kelly said. "We're back together, Women Unite made progress, and Screech has a girlfriend. But, you

know," she told Zack, nodding at an empty spot in the room, "we never did get that Christmas tree."

Zack came up behind Kelly, gently taking the CDs out of her hand before giving her a comforting kiss. "Maybe not," he said. "But, hey"—he pointed at the collection of Christmas songs she'd been holding—"we can still go caroling."

"Yeah," said Screech, coming in with Carla. "Let's serenade Mike! I'm dying to try out some new harmonies."

Kelly grinned. "What are we waiting for?"

Slater, Jessie, Leslie, and Alex joined them, and a minute later the whole gang was standing outside Mike's door.

"Knock, knock," said Screech loudly.

Mike opened the door. "What's going on?"

"We're caroling!" Screech said in a high voice. "Deck—"

"Wait a minute." Slater held up his hand. "I have to ask a question first. Who won the football game? We pulled out before it even got started."

Mike gave a thumbs-up sign.

"We won?" said Zack.

"No. We lost. Thanks to Coach Saroyan. I had a little talk with him before the game. Told him about the unsavory activities of one Ken Danvers, and the coach benched him for the entire game."

"Wow! He benched his star quarterback!" Slater said.

Zack looked at Kelly. "He should've decked him with the bench."

Kelly shrugged. "All that's history. But I have to say I'm glad Ken didn't play. Maybe he'll think twice now before lying to someone else."

"I hope he does," Mike said. "But I've learned something, too. There's more important things than winning."

Screech clapped his hands. "I'm with you, big guy. There *are* more important things than winning. Namely, singing."

"Deck the halls," Screech began to shrill.

Mike winced. "Please, everyone," he begged, "join in."

So Kelly and Zack, Jessie and Slater, Screech and Carla, and Alex and Leslie did just that.

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Mistletoe Magic

It's the holiday season at Cal U, and the gang is getting into the Christmas spirit. But there's other news in the suite—Jessie Spano is coming to visit!

Kelly can't wait to see her old friend, and neither can Zack. He's sure that having Jessie around will cement his newfound relationship with Kelly. But Slater has mixed feelings about seeing Jessie. Does he want to rekindle their volatile romance?

Meanwhile, everybody in the suite has a secret Santa, and Screech is hoping to woo his special recipient. He gives her his most prized possessions—a lab rat from his latest science experiment, an X ray of his skull, a piece of moon rock—and hopes that she appreciates them.

Will Jessie and Slater get back together? Will Screech win over his secret Santa? Find out when you read *Mistletoe Magic*, the terrific new novel about "Saved by the Bell's" college clan.

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